**Prologue**

*Her name is Precious Jade.*

*To her supervisor though she is Number Eighteen - Loose Threads and Seams. To Mr Lai she is nothing, dust, less than; just another country bumpkin drawn to Southern China’s industrial miracle.*

*The Lucky Orchid garment factory in Zhongshan City, Guangdong Province, ingests a constant blue stream of cheap denim, converting obese indigo bales to a cascade of slim-line, cut-price blue jeans for the West. Precious Jade has worked at the Lucky Orchid garment factory for seven months now. For her, the thrill of a steady income has long since worn thin. Eighteen-hour shifts, seven days a week will do that to you.*

*It’s 1.35 a.m. and Mr Lai has just informed her that he will need her to stay on the line. The client, a US retail giant, has reneged on the contract. Something to do with increased oil prices and lower wharehousing costs. Way beyond Precious Jade’s experience of the world. The upshot is: more jeans, faster. It means that Precious Jade won’t sleep tonight before she begins her next shift at 8 a.m. She does know that.*

*Precious Jade would love to sleep. But sleep is out of the question, for another twenty-four hours.*

*Mr Lai counts off the even numbers for tea. Number Eighteen is even.*

*Tea’s a blessing, at least.*

*Precious Jade observes the other girls as she sips. Beaten down, pale and exhausted except for Bright Jewel, who catches her eye and makes a face. Funny. Odd, how there’s so much promise in a name. Hopeful prediction. Bright jewel has been here for two years now and yet always has the energy to dance for a few minutes when the daily shift ends at 2 a.m.*

*Precious Jade sips her tea and wonders again about the kind of man who could pay six month’s salary for a pair of trousers.*

*And what would such a man make of Precious Jade?*

*We are so far away and yet, so close. She thinks. Connected by a pair of pants.*

*Rumours abound about the price of these trousers in the retail emporiums of America and Britain. Ludicrous.*

*Who are you that you can spend such a sum on a pair of denim trousers? How do you think? What do you find precious? Do you ever think of me?*

*I have so many questions for you, Gwai Loh. So much to tell.*

**Chapter 1**

‘I drop my cloak of invisibility and shoot three consecutive Weirballs at your unprotected back.’ As I speak these words into my headset I already know that recrimination and mean-spirited reprisal will render this game more or less unbearable for the rest of the night.

Sure enough, a dialogue window erupts on my screen. Tony is typing his response, two fingers, letter by laborious letter: ‘What the hell are you playing at, Simon?’

I smile. Like me, Tony wears a headset but often flips to keyboard for real-time communication. It’s so I can’t hear the anger in his voice. Fury gives it a ludicrous high-pitched, squeaky quality, making him sound like a strangled glove puppet. I think he knows this.

‘Just trying to slow you down. A perfectly legitimate attack.’ I counter over the mic.

Tony and I have been a double-act for two years now; since we clocked one another as kindred sprites at the London MCM. We were the only delegates dressed as Necromanicate of Eringord characters, so, naturally we hooked up for a tankard or two.

Back then Eringord, or ‘The Craft’ as we call it, was still just one of many online game realms jostling for cyberspace and players. In that respect we like to think of ourselves as pioneers, early explorers of this brave new world. These days, of course, Eringord is pretty much a total alternate reality, with millions of gamers worldwide spending more of their waking hours in the Necromanticate than they do in the real world. But Tony and I were there from the beginning, more or less.

Despite the excited voice, Tony incarnate is an imposing presence. Six foot, perma-tanned, with a full head of mid-length black hair and an impressive physique, Tony is one of the only gamers I know who actually bears any resemblance to his online character. What’s more in the real world Tony is, in fact, a genuine corporate warrior – Senior Account Director at McFadden Springer, one of London’s top branding agencies.

We’ve come a long way together, which is why I feel such a keen sense of betrayal now that Tony has elected to dissolve our partnership. Evidently, he believes that his Apex-level Warrior-Mage has sufficient mana, skill and cunning to go it alone in the treacherous realm of the Necromanticor and all his works.

Well, fuck him. That’s exactly the kind of behaviour that gets you three consecutive Weirballs in the back when you’re not looking.

Tony’s calmer, more measured tones now crackle through my headphones.

‘I swivel, blasting you with a full double-handed Pentangle Plosive Shock-Hex. Thereby sending you into the ether. I do this in the full knowledge that I render myself vulnerable. I think I can count on the respect of my fellow players not to attack, whilst I recover my mana.’

My jaw literally drops. The double-handed Pentangle Plosive Shock-Hex is a last resort measure for any level Warrior-Mage. Only used in the direst of emergencies, utterly depleting as it does the user’s mana, psychic and physical shields. What’s more, etiquette dictates that it is only ever deployed against one of the Necromanticor’s A.I creations, never a fellow player.

It’s like Putin resorting to the nuclear deterrent to quell a Hairdresser’s strike in Pskov.

On screen, my character, an Apex-Level Thief/Assassin with occupational spell-charm abilities is blown to pixillations in a series of retina-fusing blue fireballs.

With that simple, three-key digitate and a mouse click. Tony’s killed me.

The bastard.

Utterly destroying my character, all my hard-earned levels and powers and any chance of being able to use him again. A death blow. After two years of trust, loyalty, shared hardship and teamwork he’s put me out of the game, just like that.

I barely register the moving shapes on the screen as I sit, stunned, blinking back tears.

I rub my eyes as the culprit, a black-cowled Warrior-Mage, armed with his golden staff, hobbles away, neatly side-stepping a dwarf brandishing a teaspoon. Although my character is essentially defunct, I still have phantom rights to observe the gameplay.

The Warrior-Mage breaks into a jog.

The dwarf keeps pace.

In a normal game a dwarf would never go anywhere near a full-blown, Apex-Level Black Warrior-Mage with anything less than three cohorts of the Undead in full Runic Panoply. Now, of course, with his Mana at a critically low level, the Black Warrior-Mage presents all the offensive powers of a Manatee calf, so this newcomer is prepared to take liberties.

I employ the arrow keys to follow the action as Tony’s Mage trots towards the enchanted forest of Caddweynne. With his Powers and Skill levels at just above zero he’s unable to put on a turn of speed or use the ‘Leap & Bound’ facility to outrun the dwarf.

‘Fuck off,’ says the Black Warrior-Mage.

The dwarf taps him with the teaspoon.

It’s embarrassing: a dwarf with a teaspoon is a third level newbie. First level is a peasant serf. You pick up a twig and poke around in the earth. After a while you unearth a bifurcated stick and dig for turnips, collect enough of these and you’ll find an enchanted skull which turns you into a dwarf-miner. If I remember correctly, eventually you find a cast-iron teaspoon, which you’re supposed to use to excavate the breastplate of a Goblin Warrior. Of course every item in the game has a hit-point value of one form or another and, although the teaspoon is meant to be negligible, if the dwarf keeps hitting the Black Warrior-Mage long enough Tony’s going to end up handing over ninety-seven levels to a tyro with a kitchen utensil.

‘Stop hitting me with that spoon, you tit. The spoon’s for digging. It’s not a weapon.’ Tony’s voice in my headset, reverting to puppet mode.

‘You can’t tell me what to do. It’s a free country, nonce.’ The dwarf has the nasal dipthong-slaughtering tones of a South London boy. He’s young, no more than fourteen or fifteen, I reckon.

‘Eringord’s not a free country, you little shit. That’s the whole point. It’s the realm of the Necromanticor. There are things you can do here and there are things you cannot do.’

‘Who says?’

‘The…the…Necromanticor,’ squeals the glove puppet.

‘Get stuffed.’

The dwarf keeps tapping away.

‘Look, I want you to stop doing that. At the moment I’m reduced in my powers, but if you don’t quit it right now I’m going to make your life a living hell.’

‘Yeah?’

‘Yeah.’

‘You and who’s army?’

‘Me and the Army of the Undead in full Composite Runic Panoply.’

‘Ooooh, I’m so scared.’

‘You will be be.’

‘So, summon them.’

‘I will…in a minute.’

The Black Warrior-Mage swivels and runs in the opposite direction. The dwarf keeps pace easily, tapping away with the teaspoon, like a vicar at a recalcitrant egg.

By running, Tony is reducing his already critical mana even further.

‘Look, can you stop attacking me.’

‘Why?’

‘Because you’re going to kill me if you keep going. You’ll wipe me out.’

‘Good. I’ll inherit all your shit an’ powers an’ that.’

‘No, that’s not right. It’s not how it’s supposed to work. This is not good. You can’t kill a Black Warrior-Mage with a teaspoon. It’s not done. Not possible.’

‘Another few hundred slaps I reckon and you’re munted. Your mana’s way low.’

‘OK. OK. Stop hitting me now. Let’s have a talk. A truce. I’ll share some powers with you. You’ll have more power in the Pre-Mage Levels than anyone’s ever seen.’

‘Nah. Couple more taps with the teaspoon and I’ll have all your shit.’

‘Just… just…you haven’t done the levels. You won’t know what to do with these powers. I can help you. You have to work through all fifty levels before you even become a Mage. You’ve got to work through them. Look, I’m three years in ‘the Craft’, I’m on five hours a night, four nights a week. I probably know the kingdom of Eringord better than any other player in the realm. I know all the back doors, all the secret rooms. Experience you can’t buy, I’ll share it with you.’

There’s a silence in my headset while the kid considers the offer. I can hear Tony breathing, quick shallow breaths. Panicking. On screen the dwarf pecks away.

I’m wondering why Tony has never even mentioned these back-doors to me in all the years I’ve been his Thief/Assassin partner. I know Tony’s been in e mail contact with Eringord’s designers in the States for the past year; as one of the games highest-ranking players they value his feedback. For some reason they’ve never contacted me.

‘Nah. Fuck it. You sound like a paedo actually.’ With that the dwarf hits the Black Warrior-Mage on the forehead again with his teaspoon. The Mage’s knees buckle. He crumbles like a condemned tower-block.

The dwarf’s levels light up like Hong Kong Harbour, his sprite glowing like a Ready Brek ad. No one can touch him now. And off he struts, wielding the teaspoon of doom.

Silence.

‘Hello?’ I say into the headset. ‘Hello, Tony? Hello?’

‘It’s me,’ he croaks at last.

‘Are you OK?’

‘What do you think?’

I don’t know what to say. ‘I’m out of the game too.’

‘Yeah, but did you see? Did you see what that fucking midget just did to me?’

**Chapter 2**

The assistant person is a blonde pencil in chic black punctuated by ironically yellow-rimmed glasses, circa 1970’s - era and price tag. She flits around the boardroom on four-inch heels delicately inserting coffee. The cups are low and wide and dark green, glazed with a band of gold around the rim. The coffee is rich and dark, Italian plunger. Nestled in each saucer is a miniature dark Italian chocolate biscuini. Tiny, semi-precious objects.

Mine is an undersized wheaten gasket.

This lot expect exquisite sweetmeats; they’re used to the best. In their world a box of Italian biscotti is the equivalent of an English Peak Freens Assortment. As always there are the good ones: the ones enrobed with finely-milled chocolate, burnished with a tiny swath of genuine gold leaf, bursting with praline millefeuille or Provencal Limon Crème, and then there are the crap ones, the ones no one wants, garnished with nothing more toothsome than a baby’s fingernail of desiccated coconut, or shavings from the Gingerbread King’s balls. Luck of the draw.

Except it’s not.

 I’d be happy to get a crap one from time to time, in accordance with the law of averages.

Trouble is, what I get is beyond crap, always. Without fail.

I think they have a special box for me.

It’s not the miniature Digestives that I object to. It’s the being singled-out that I don’t like.

I can’t deal with being singled out.

And the people around the table notice. They’re the kind of people who do notice. Everything matters at this table – where you sit, who gets coffee first, what kind of filling, how much chocolate. Minutae matters in the nano-politics of a London brand communications agency like MacFadden, Springer.

It’s why I hate coming here, that and the crappy biscuits. And the fact that I hate going anywhere outside of my Clapham flat.

Doug Macfadden, crop-headed fifty-something in a black polo-neck, pops a tiny chocolate strawberry-slice into his maw, tapping his cup with a teaspoon. The Pencil instantly reappears at his shoulder. She deposits another choco-millefeuille lemon-slice into his saucer with a flourish and a pair of tongs.

I hate The Pencil. I fantasise about her tripping, toppling off those four-inch heels and cracking her skull on the edge of the table. Mashing one of those yellow frames into her occipital cavity so badly that the surgeons can’t remove it for fear of damaging the tiny piece of brain that she possesses. She ends up paralysed. And fat. In a wheelchair. With a lemon-yellow retro monocle. Forever glaring out at the world, furiously indignant one-eyed-eyebrow raised in silent question: Why me? Oh Jesus God, why me?

‘We’re all here. Let’s get this meeting underway. Prinsley, get your arse up front,’ announces MacFadden in a South London accent, indicating the white screen which slowly descends from the ceiling. At the same time, blinds drop, screening the windows, making it all seem quite exciting, like being invited into the lair of a Bond villain.

Mary Prinsley is an American in her late-thirties who dresses in her late-twenties and talks like she’s eighty. A nibbler, she opens the presentation with a logo flashed on the screen behind her.

Val-Mal. The words are spelled out in sans serif type, a brutal Futura next to a simple yellow circle.

 We all know it. There can’t be many people in the world who don’t recognize the Val-Mall logo, but Mary points it out for us, letter by letter, indicating with a half-eaten white-chocolate-enrobed Kiwi Fruit-centred trufflelini.

‘Val-Mall. Where Value comes first,’ she breathes.

We’re given a second or so to inhale the awe-inspiring entity that is Val-Mall, before Mary flips her handset, bringing up the next Powerpoint image.

‘Everyone in this room is familiar with Val-Mall’s penetration in the UK retail sector; nothing short of a contemporary commercial phenomenon. With the fully branded Hyper-Mall experience available in every major city in the UK and wholly-owned sub-branded retail outlets in every major town it’s safe to say that Val-Mall is the UK’s premier retailer outside of the grocery industry. With a Val-Mall Mega-Centa due to open in three major cities in the next five years we’re expecting total cultural and sociological immersion within seven years.’

Mary flips through a series of graphs full of coloured lines, all projecting more or less upwards.

‘Clearly, we’ve got great product here, but let me just say this,’ Mary cocks her head, a coy glance at the room, ‘it wouldn’t be right to undersell our own contribution. So perhaps now would be an appropriate moment to hear it for the strategic and creative genius of Doug MacFadden and Craig Springer?’

We all clap but it’s desultory; the room is dark so we can get away with it.

At this point Craig Springer takes over the Powerpoint controls. Springer is a greasy-haired Skeletor-lookalike, Antipodean lick-spittle whose only agenda is to make himself look good in front of the majority shareholder, MacFadden.

He shows us the latest TV commercial-stroke-branded-content piece, which has rabbits in it.

We applaud. Like automatons.

Finally, Tony, ‘The Black Mage’ Myjesky is invited to give his part of presentation. This is why I’m here of course. Tony made me. He insisted that I come and he knows I hate leaving my flat. He makes me attend client meetings like this to punish me.

 Tony holds a tiny, complicated raspberry slice constructed by an elfin jeweler, between finger and thumb; snaps it away like a Doberman, mashing the fragile construction between paleonithic jaws.

A slide pops up behind him. I can see it’s not good news for Val-Mall - there’s an underlying problem of overheads against revenue.

It takes Tony twenty minutes to explain this to the advertising people.

Tony is the Head of strategy at the agency, which means he can commission research into his client’s business. It’s why we’re friends, or at least business associates.

Tony knows I can read raw data like most people can read a fastfood menu. I see the patterns in Tony’s charts instantly. But I do this at home in front of my computer. I don’t do people. I don’t do meetings. I have this thing - a physical thing. I go red. Not just a little puce but really red. Think Geraint Hoggewattle, the Eringord blacksmith. Now imagine the deep heart of his furnace. Now go a couple of shades darker. And hotter. There’s so many things I can’t do, because of the red.

It’s nothing, really. In the scheme of things. Not like being shot. Or losing a leg. Or being mad. It’s not like ropes or chains or intellectual retardation. But I do blush. At more or less everything. It’s my thing. I’m ashamed of it. I blush to even think about it. I blush if you look at me. It’s called Social Anxiety Disorder. There’s a name for it. I can get it treated in Sweden by having surgery. It’s called Endoscopic Transthoracic Sympathicotomy. They have to cut some nerves in my face. It might be the solution. I’m thinking about it. But I worry that they might snip the wrong nerves and I’ll end up with a grotesque leer or a slack neanderthal bottom lip.

In any case, I don’t want to talk about it. With anyone.

I’m way too embarrassed to have this conversation with my doctor.

I can more or less function in a pack. But if you single me out, give me a different biscuit for example; a crappier biscuit than everyone else gets, my neck swells, my face gets hot. This is what happens.

So, I pick up the wheaten gasket and shove it down my gullet.

I can’t breathe. The biscuit crumbles against my uvula. Instant cough reflex. I grab my coffee and slam it back.

The black coffee is like molten lava.

I’m still coughing and hawking up pellets of wheatmeal when Doug McFadden begins to speak.

‘Well, there it is then, you’re going.’

‘Newbury? I don’t do on-site. I don’t go anywhere, you know that, Tony.” I can feel my neck enlarging, my face is going red but I know Tony is not going to back down and this is one of the many reasons I hate him.

‘You either do this or you can forget the whole project. I’ll get another consutant.’

‘Tony, I don’t do on-site.’

‘Do it, or be fired.’

‘Tony, I can’t….’

I hand over the MacFadden Springer corporate credit card to Mrs Lush, part-owner with her husband, Eric Lush, of the Newbury View Hotel. She looks at me like I’ve just given her counterfeit coin. I smile reassuringly, as though I am the authorized holder. Which of course, I am.

I’ll need to take a copy of this and block three hundred pounds from your card for extras’, she announces.

Why? My brain screams. Why would you do such a thing on an already fragile credit arrangement? What do you suspect me of doing to your horrible hotel?

Mrs Lush scrapes her machine back and forth over my card. ‘That’s for you’ she announces, handing back my card, as though she ever had any ownership rights.

‘We have a bistro which serves from seven-thirty pee-em until eleven sharp. Our chef does a gorgeously mean prawn tagliatelle.’

I can’t breathe. I need to get to my room.

‘Can I have my card back please. I need internet.’

‘Ah, internet. I’d have to give you a wire. And then you have to do some things, and the code is 123newblush, I believe it’s called Ethernet cable. But unfortunately, I don’t have one.’

‘I have to have internet to do my job.’

‘Ah, yes. Well I don’t. Perhaps if you wait for Eric.’

‘Could I ring you from my room?’

‘Yes, indeedy or just ping us an email.’

My room overlooks Newbury town centre. So yes, the Newbury View Hotel offers a genuinely panoramic and unimpeded view of the town. Only the view is crap. Newbury is one of those market towns that’s been beaten down and cored by a blend of corporate architecture and concrete. Not the hotel’s fault actually.

 And to be fair, breakfast is quite good. I put a spreadsheet type thing on the door last night that let me order bacon and eggs and toast and coffee although I couldn’t have fruit and cereal. Fruit was only prunes anyway, so I’m reasonably happy with my choices. But the room service man has invaded my privacy, who, in the course of collecting my tray, reveals himself to be Eric Lush, owner and general busybody.

 ‘I see you didn’t finish the Full English. Any reason, sir?’

‘I left a bit. It was perfectly fine though, thank you.’

‘I take it you’re here on business, sir?’

‘I am.’

‘I can tell. Ex copper, you see. It’s the little clues that give you away, sir. Coffee gone. Not finishing your Full English. Usually a sign of a punishing morning meeting on the horizon. Stressful.’

 ‘My stomach’s a bit...’

‘Nerves. So long as you didn’t shit the bed. Bit of advice, get yourself another coffee, brandy chaser from the mini bar and boom, down the hatch. Never fails,’ he says, tapping his nose. With that he gathers up the tray and, mercifully leaves me to prepare for what I imagine will be a day of unremitting horror.

I’m on the corporate credit card so on reflection, I decide that a little drop of brandy might be just the thing.

I’m feeling a bit floaty, what with the brandy on top of the Lexotan, which I take for general anxiety, when the Mercedes taxi pulls up outside what appears to be a giant aircraft hanger on the outskirts of town. An illuminated sans serif monolith in blue incorporating a gold roundel confirms that this is indeed the Val-Mall.

I sign the driver’s chit and, remembering to take my briefcase, step out and gaze around the enormous car park, clocking the fact that it’s less than a quarter full. Small groups of customers drift in and out of the entrance, punctuated by the constant swish of automatic doors. It’s all very normal for a grey weekday morning at a superstore: clinical and efficient; humming along if not exactly buzzing.

The only anomaly is an area just to the left of the entrance where there appears to be some form of demonstration taking place. An elderly lady, a tweedy male in his thirties with a receding hairline and a young, hippyish-looking girl with magenta hair are chanting, although not in unison, and not, by the sounds of it, even the same slogan. They have with them the usual paraphernalia of banners, megaphone and a mongrel on a string.

As I approach it’s apparent that the young girl is attempting to impose order in the matter of the slogan, ‘Look, Alice, it’s: “People before profits. We abhor the superstore”. That’s what we agreed. Because it rhymes.’

‘Nobody says “abhor”, Heavenly. The people shopping here won’t even know what it means.’

‘Hev, not Heavenly. You know that and you know it’s “abhor”, replies the girl with the hair.

‘Quite right, it is a bore, so stop going on about it. You just do yours and I’ll do mine. Besides, I can only stay for another five minutes.’ says Alice, before launching into her off-brand chant into the megaphone: ‘What do we want? The Val-Mall out. When do we want it? Now.’

 ‘And what the hell are you meant to be saying, Toby?’ Hev, making no headway with Alice, has turned on the tweedy male.

‘I’m just sort of adding to the general hubbub, it’s more of an underlying noise than any particular articulation,’ he replies diffidently.

Trying to remain as unobtrusive as possible, I head for the entrance at a trot, having no wish to be drawn into any kind of interaction with this kind of group.

A flabby tattooed couple in tracksuits emerge from the store pushing a trolley full of goods.

‘People before profits,’ the young girl bellows at them through the megaphone. ‘Shame on you.’

‘Mind your fuckin’ business,’ growls tracky-man, flicking her the finger.

‘Right,’ announces the young girl bending to pick up a small object at her feet. ‘Have some piss,’ she megaphones, before letting loose with a small jiffy bag of fluid.

I’ve already broken into a run and attempt to shimmy past the oncoming couple when the Jiffy bag hits me on the hip and explodes.

The couple howl with laughter. ‘Twat,’ sniggers tracky-man as they cross the road into the car park. It’s not clear if he’s referring to me or the girl. Or both.

‘Oh, God. I’m so sorry,’ says the girl as she runs towards me. ‘That wasn’t meant for you.’

Of course my best strategy would be to escape, sprint for the entrance, but frankly I’m so shocked and stupefied that I’m unable to move. I stand rooted to the spot, gulping air, puce in the face, only yards from the safety of the automatic doors, my chinos stained and dripping.

‘Shitting hell, are you having a heart attack?’

‘No, I…’

‘You’re very red in face. Are you sure you’re all right? Should I call for an ambulance?’

‘Please,’I beg, wanting this aggressive hippy harpy to leave me to my misery.

‘He’s in shock, Heavenly. You just assaulted him,’ announces Alice.

‘Better get him out of the road then,’ adds Toby.

Heavenly, or whatever her name is, and Toby, take an arm each and more or less drag me across the road to their little patch on the pavement. I drop my briefcase as they lower me onto an ancient car blanket where the mongrel on a string briefly sniffs at my chinos before turning distainfully away.

‘You’re not going to call the police or anything are you? asks Heavenly.

I can still feel the heat radiating from my cheeks but escape from these idiots is not currently an option. It wouldn’t have been so bad if I’d worn jeans instead of chinos, but with the beige linen there’s now a shameful dark stain across my lap. There’s no way I can stroll into my Val-Mall meeting resembling a giant incontinent beetroot. Also, I’m hyperventilating; the onset of a full-blown panic attack.

‘Here,’ says Heavenly, rummaging in a dirty canvas satchel. She produces a grubby poncho which she throws to me. ‘Pat the worst of it off with that and you’ll be fine.’

‘I’m covered in piss,’ I wheeze.

‘Don’t stress about it, it’s just an old rag really.’

‘I have a meeting in fifteen minutes and I’m covered in piss.’

‘Actually it’s PLJ,’ she grins.

‘What’s PLJ?’

‘Piss in a Little Jiffy bag.’ She sniggers. ‘Just kidding. PLJ is concentrated lemon juice. For colour. It’s more or less water really.’

‘It’s not actually piss?’

‘We’re not savages.’

The girl’s face is quite close to mine and I see that despite the scary hair, boots, commando trousers and shapeless hand-knitted jumper, she has surprisingly delicate features, like an Eringord elfling dressed by Oxfam. She smells quite pleasingly of incense; another surprise.

‘You’re breathing very heavily,’ she insists, ‘are you sure you’re not having some kind of a fit?’

‘I’m hyperventilating, just please back off.’

‘You have to breathe into a plastic bag for that,’ advises the elderly lady. ‘I did a St John’s Ambulance course. Long time ago of course.’

‘Will a paper bag do? All our Jiffy bags are full of fake piss,’ says Heavenly, rummaging in the satchel.

‘Any kind of bag really, I think. Not a shopping bag, they’re too big’ advises Alice.

‘Or a string bag,’ adds Toby.

‘Here,’ Heavenly offer me a crumpled brown bag, which I snatch, thrusting my face into the opening and taking a deep breath. I inhale a fine cloud of dust and find myself choking and gasping for air. I splutter and retch, coughing up gobs of sweet tasting fragments.

I desperately fight to catch my breath while the elderly lady thumps my back.

‘Oh, that’s just meringue crumbs,’ says Heavenly. ‘They got a bit crushed in the bag. Sorry, I suppose that’s another type of bag you shouldn’t use. One with meringue bits in it.’

Oddly, the momentary choking fit has actually short-circuited my panic attack. My breathing returns to normal. I peer up to see the three of them examining me with concerned expressions. ‘I’m fine,’ I say.

‘You’re still quite red. And you smell of booze. Are you drunk?’

‘I had some Cognac at breakfast,’ I explain, ‘a miniature.’

A look of sympathetic understanding passes between them. ‘Ah,’ says Heavenly, ‘probably the shakes.’

 ‘No, look, I’m not a…’

 ‘It’s Ok, Toby might have a drop of something, to take the edge off. Toby, what’s in the flask?’

 Toby produces a thermos from his jacket pocket and begins to unscrew the cup. ‘Coffee with a spot of uisge beatha. For medicinal purposes,’ he winks.

 ‘Look, I don’t…’ I’m about to refuse, offended that these three idiots clearly believe me to be a raging alcoholic, when I think better of it. Fuck it, I have a meeting I never wanted to be at in ten minutes; I’ve been horribly traumatized, and to be fair, I probably do look like a wino who’s pissed himself. I gratefully take the cup. There’s more than a little spot of whisky in there. Ordinarily I would never knowingly drink from someone else’s cup but these are desperate times.

 ‘I’m Heavenly. Technically Penelope, Nirvana, Orchid, Heavenly’ announces the girl. ‘It’s ridiculous, I know. I prefer Hev, which is not great, but Nirv and Orc are even worse. If you want, you can call me Penelope. But then I’d have to punch you in the face.’

The stuff in the cup has hit the spot and I’m beginning to feel a good deal calmer. As I take the girl’s outstretched hand I notice that my own has stopped shaking. ‘I’m Simon, Simon Collins. You can call me Simon.’

‘This is Alice and Toby and that’s Bodger,’ says Hev indicating the mongrel on a string. ‘We’re protesting against the evils of conglomerate corporations and the corrosive drive for profit at any price.’

 ‘And because the Val-Mall is putting me out of business,’ adds Alice.

‘We’ve been through this, Alice,’ sighs Hev. ‘This is bigger than just your knitwear shop.’

‘Not to me,’ retorts Alice.

I finish the coffee and pass the empty thermos cup back to Toby who refills it and takes a pensive sip. ‘I’m here because I don’t have a choice,’ he says.

‘He’s a landlord, grinding the faces of the poor. He’s part of the problem,’ says Hev.

‘She won’t pay the rent unless I do this occasionally,’ he shrugs.

‘It’s penance and it’s not like you’ve got anything better to do with your time.’

Toby sips at his coffee and considers this for a moment. ‘That’s true,’ he shrugs.

‘Well, I say, getting to my feet, ‘nice to meet you but I do have a meeting to get to.’

‘In there?’

‘Afraid so.’

‘So you’re a scab then. You actually work for those evil bastards?’

I was feeling fine a moment ago and now this sudden burst of aggression is making me anxious again. ‘I don’t work for them,’ I say. ‘I don’t even want to be here.’

‘So why are you here?’

‘It’s a long story,’ I sigh.

‘Well you can’t go to a meeting like that,’ she says, indicating my stained chinos. ‘Not even with those scumbags.’

Much as I need to get away from these people, I realise that Heavenly is right. I really can’t meet with the senior management here in my current state. Hev chews on her bottom lip for a moment or two. ‘Look, I could get the van and run you into town. I know the owner of Phoenix Fashions on the high street. She can fix you up with a pair of jeans or chinos or something. Retro items, you’ll like it.’

‘What do you mean, “retro”?’

‘Pre-loved. You know, second-hand, but good quality stuff.’

The idea of pulling on a pair of trousers that someone else’s arse and genitals have already occupied fills me with total horror. It must be written all over my face as Toby quickly steps in. ‘Don’t be silly, Hev. We’re standing outside the biggest retail emporium in Berkshire, there’s no need to drive the poor man all the way back into town for a simple pair of trousers. In any case, he’ll be late for his meeting. I’ll nip in and get a pair, it’s the least we can do.’

 ‘Toby, what you’re suggesting completely defeats the purpose of our mission here. We’re supposed to be protesting this montrosity’s profiteering not adding to it.’

 ‘One pair of cheap jeans isn’t go to make any difference to anything.’

 ‘That’s precisely where you’re wrong: every pair of socks, every crappy sweatshop-manufactured nylonic onesie sleepsuit adds to the sum of human misery and out-of-control global consumption while these megastores feed our addiction to cheap mass-produced crap and contribute to the hollowing out of our town centres and communities.’

 ‘Good point,’ says Toby, turning to me, ‘Jeans or chinos?’

 ‘Jeans are fine.’

Toby appraises me for a second, ‘I’d say about a 30 -34?’

‘Sounds about right.’

With that, Toby heads for the entrance.‘Toby,’ bellows Heavenly, to his departing back, ‘don’t do it. Do not go in there. Toby!’ She rummages in her satchel armoury for one of the bloated Jiffy bags but the doors have already swooshed closed behind the heedless Toby.

 ‘For God’s sake,’ she pouts.

 ‘Oh, don’t be such a baby,’ says Alice, turning to me in a stage whisper adds, ‘she gets in a proper wig if she doesn’t get her own way.’

 ‘Shut up, Alice. I’m right here. And I’m right. Here.’

 ‘Not always, Heavenly. Not everything is as black and white as you like to think. Anyway, I’ve done my hour, I ought to be getting back. There might be customers.’

 ‘Not if Toby has anything to do with it,’ grumbles Heavenly.

 ‘He just making amends, Heavenly, doing the right thing, which isn’t always what you happen to say it is.’

 ‘You can always rely on Toby to make the wrong choice, you know he’s a bloody Sadim.’

 ‘You think what you like, Heavenly, you always do. Anyhow, nice to meet you, young man. And if ever you need any quality knitwear, look for Knitpickers on the high street, that’s me. I could do with the custom as these buggers are putting me out of business.’

 ‘It’s not just about you, Alice,’ sighs Heavenly.

We watch in uncomfortable silence as Alice strides across the carpark. Finally Hev turns to me with evident disapproval, ‘So what’s your role in all of this?’ indicating the vast concrete bunker behind us with a flap of her wrist.

 ‘I’m just a consultant. Like I said, I don’t work for them.’

 ‘But you’re happy to take their blood money,’ she sniffs.

 ‘I’m a sub-contractor. They’re my client’s client. And to be honest, I don’t much like them or my client.’

 ‘Well, that’s something I suppose. So what exactly do you do?’

 ‘I’m a consumer behaviourist. I analyse trends and patterns in consumer behavior and work out strategies to…’ I tail off, knowing that the word “consumer” has already consigned me to the inner circle of hell as far as Heavenly is concerned.

Too late, Heavenly is already onto me. ‘You find ways to get people to spend more money on crap.’

‘It’s not always crap.’

‘Name one thing you’ve done that you’re actually proud of.’

‘I invented the half-trolley.’ The words are already out of my mouth before I can take them back. It’s because of the unaccustomed alcohol, which has made me garrulous, that and the fact that the half-trolley has become an automatic response for me, being my only real claim to fame and the jewel in the crown of my professional CV.

‘What the hell is a half-trolley?’

‘You don’t want to know.’

‘No, I do. I really want to know what a half-trolley is.’

‘You won’t like it.’

‘I already don’t like it and I don’t even know what it is. But tell me so I can hate it for the right reasons.’

‘Some years ago we found that shoppers were no longer doing the big weekly food shop. The trend was to buy on a daily basis instead.’

‘So?’

‘So shoppers started using baskets instead of the big trolleys. Once the basket was full they’d hit the tills.’

‘So?’

‘So I invented the half trolley. You know, the ones that are only half as deep as the full-size ones. Customers found it more convenient than lugging a heavy basket around. But psychologically with a half-trolley they still felt that they were only doing a quick shop.’

‘So you tricked the world into buying more crap?’

‘It’s a convenience for the shopper.’

‘A convenient way to buy more crap.’

‘Everyone’s got to eat.’

Hev grimaces, indicating my stained trousers. ‘Perhaps I hit the right person after all.’

It shouldn’t matter, but for some reason I don’t want this girl to see me as a just another corporate lackey, part of the grotesque world of Tony Majeski and McFadden Springer. ‘I do other things,’ I say.

‘Like what?’

‘It so happens that I’m an Apex-Level Thief -Assasin with occupational spell-charm abilities. In the Craft.’

One side of her mouth lifts a fraction. I notice that she has tiny pointy white teeth and I can’t tell whether this half-smile is amused or pitying. ‘Well, bully for you,’ she says. ‘You should probably get out more.’

I’m gutted. I just played my social trump card. On the few occasions that I do actually interact with real live people I can usually guarantee a more or less awestruck response to that little snippet of bio. Probably because the only real live people I hang out with are involved with the Craft in some way. She’s right. I should get out more. Having used up the last of my conversational ammunition I’m reduced to examining my watch and huffing.

Bodger hauls himself creakily upright like an ancient marionette and begins to whimper.

‘S’alright, boy. Toby’s coming back,’ croons Hev, crouching to fondle the mutt’s ears. ‘Spoilt rotten this one. Oof,’ she recoils from Boger’s snout, ‘smells rotten too. God knows what Toby feeds him, farts in a can if his breath’s anything to go by. Hard to say which end of him stinks worse.’ She cranes her neck to check the entrance. ‘Perhaps Toby’s fallen for your half-trolley con.’

‘The power of psychology,’ I shrug. ‘Anyway, what’s a Sadim?’

She laughs, ‘You know that expresion a fool and his money are soon parted?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well that’s Toby. Give you the shirt off his back, or in your case, trousers. He’s a colossal mug when it comes to money. Not that it matters since he’s properly minted. His father caught the property boom in the seventies and still owns half of Berkshire. Toby was given a humungous property portfolio on his twenty-first birthday and has spent the past ten years chucking his cash away on the most shockingly dismal investments. What’s left is only a fairly massive property portfolio. Lovely man but he has the Sadim touch, everything he touches turns to shit. The opposite of Midas.’

‘I’m a bit concerned about my trousers now.’

‘You should be. They’ll probably be transparent or made of glitter or something. You remember The Jizz?’

I shake my head, baffled.

‘Nobody does. Creators of Jizz-Funk, which was meant to be some kind of evolutionary blend of jazz, slap-bass and synth played by a bunch of idiots prancing around in body sheaths and S&M gear. Turns out that the world was not waiting for a poor man’s version of Level 42 dressed as pervert speed skaters. Anyway, Toby managed them into rightful oblivion, losing a bundle on the way. And then there was “Choirboys Rock”, a rock musical extravaganza starring a certain Paul Francis Gadd, otherwise known as Gary Glitter. That was back in 2005 apparently, impeccable timing as always. It was quietly pulled off, so to speak. Oh,’ she says, spotting Toby trotting towards us, ‘speak of the devil.’

Bodger’s stubby tail vibrates like an overwound metronome.

‘Alright, Bodge,’ says Toby, briefly fussing over his dog. Here we are then,’ he says, handing me a Val-Mal bag, ‘one brand spanking new pair of strides.’

‘Thanks.’ I pull out the jeans, which appear to be a perfectly reasonable pair of men’s True Blue denim trousers. Not arseless chaps, meggings, jeggings, or made from smoke, lace, or anything weird. I’ve got two minutes to get inside and, for the first time this morning, I feel that I might be able to get through this awful day unscathed.

‘Better put this over you while you get them on,’ announces Heavenly, retrieving the grubby old poncho,

She turns her head away as I pop my head through the poncho. It whiffs of Bodger but descends to my thighs, providing me with a modicum of decency. I kick off my shoes and as I whip off my soaked chinos I realize that my underpants are also unpleasantly squelchy. ‘Ah, you didn’t happen to get any pants as well, did you?’

‘Fraid not, old chap. You’ll just have to go commando.’

 I don’t know precisely what this means but assume it’s not a reference to camoflagued underwear. Or undies of any kind. I sigh and drop my y-fronts before putting my feet into the new jeans. I pull them up to find to my horror that I’ve been well and truly spanked by the hand of Sadim.

 I like to think of myself as slim and rangy – or a lanky beanpole, according to Tony Majeski - whereas these things have been made for a short fat bloke with stubby legs. Lengthwise they only descend to mid-calf. The waist, on the other hand, is about four inches too big.

 Holding up the slack waistband with one hand, I use the other to disentangle myself from the poncho. ‘Ah,’ says Toby, ‘not exactly made to measure, but not bad.’

 Heavenly, on the other hand, hoots with laughter.

 I can feel my face generating enough heat to make toast. I’m late, I’m wearing clown’s trousers, no undies, and my heart rate is rising again. I’m starting to pant like Bodger.

 ‘Oh God, he’s off again,’ says Heavenly.

 ‘Briefcase,’ I gasp.

 Hev duly grabs my briefcase from the rug and passes it to me. I keep my emergency Lexotan in the little compartment for business cards; I pop one onto my tongue. Toby produces his flask and pours out the last of his medicinal coffee. ‘Here,’ he says, ‘get that down you.’

 I grasp the cup and take a sip to wash down the pill. The coffee has gone tepid now so I knock back the lot in one and feel the whisky instantly warming my stomach. I slip my feet back into my shoes and hand the cup back to Toby before rolling up my soggy pants and chinos, which I place in the briefcase. By the time I’ve completed these tasks the panic attack is beginning to recede and the combination of alcohol and benzodiazepine is working to produce a pleasant feeling of detatchment.

 ‘Right, I have to go,’ I announce.

 ‘Don’t be ridiculous,’ says Heavenly, ‘you can’t walk around all day with one hand stuck into your waistband like that. You look like a sex pest.’

 ‘You’d best have Bodger’s string,’ announces Toby, undoing the frayed nylon twine. ‘It isn’t like Bodger ever runs off anyway. Too old and fat.’ He quickly passes it round my waist and stands back to admire his handiwork. ‘It’s not haute couture but it’s better than the alternative.’

 I reach for my briefcase and stand there clutching it to my chest while I try to think of something appropriate to say. The whole experience has been stressful, traumatic and slightly surreal, but now that it’s over, I’m feeling quite good about it, like you might after a spot of base jumping or running with the bulls. It feels like I’ve tested myself in some primitive ordeal and come through it relatively unscathed. ‘So, ah, thanks very much for the string,’ is the best I can do at short notice.

 ‘Don’t mention it,’ says Toby.

‘Musn’t keep them waiting,’ I mumble, nodding in the direction of the entrance. With that I head off.

 ‘Hey, Simon,’ bellows Heavenly through the megaphone, ‘we’re Heavy Opposition. You can find us on Facebook.’

Like I needed to know that.

Inside it’s all calming pale blues, muted greys and splashes of yellow. Piped music gently plays an instrumental version of “The Girl from Ipanema” in surround sound. A sense of power and plenitude is conveyed by long wide aisles which stretch away into the distance. Blue signs with yellow lettering and elegantly simple graphics are suspended from the ceiling, indicating the categories of goods on display. Here is everything you’ll ever need and more, it seems to declare in a bold sans serif font. To the right of the entrance is a counter designated “Customer Services”, I walk over and a young man with pimples and a pompadour greets me warily, ‘How can I help you today, sir?’ He wears the store’s blue uniform jacket and trousers and there’s a name tag reading: Lee Delaware. Services. I laugh out loud.

‘I’m here to see Diane Lister,’ I announce.

‘Mrs Lister is the regional manager, sir, can I help at all?’

‘I have a meeting with Mrs Lister in…’ I briefly check my watch for effect, ‘ah, two minutes ago.’

‘Are you saying you’ve already had a meeting with Mrs Lister? Past tense? Or you’d like to have one? Future conditional?’

‘I have a meeting arranged, which has not yet taken place but which should have begun two minutes ago, or possibly even three now.’

‘Ah,’ says Lee, tapping away at his bench-mounted keyboard. There’s a pause while I wait, like Schrodiger’s cat, to have my existence in their universe confirmed or not.

 ‘You must be Mr Collins from McFadden Springer,’ he announces to my relief.

I breathe out. Much as I hate it all I’m actually genuinely relieved to have my role here confirmed. ‘Simon Collins, that’s me.’

 Lee punches something into to the keyboard: ‘Mrs Lister will meet you at the Third-Floor refreshment area. In the meantime, here’s your ID,’ he announces as a rectangular paper badge is smoothly spat out by the mini printer on the counter. It reads: Slomon Collis, McFadden Springer.

 ‘Simon,’ I say, peeling away the backing.

 ‘I thought you said Solomon.’

‘It’s Simon.’

‘Well, it’s a numbered pass so I can’t change it now.’ He shrugs. I fix the sticky label to my shirt as Lee pulls the stalk microphone on the counter towards his mouth. There’s a series of amplified clonks before Lee’s voice resonates and echoes along the aisles like an adenoidal, Big Brother: ‘Mrs Pryce-Gunn,’ he announces, ‘Mrs Pryce-Gunn, to Services Desk.’

Almost instantly a short tub of a woman appears from the gardening equipment aisle wearing the ubiquitous Val-Mal blue jacket and trousers, both of which appear to be straining at the seams. She also sports a leather shoulder holster with something black and impressive in it.

‘All right, Lee?’ she says with the strong sing-song lilt of the Welsh Valleys.

‘Fine, thanks, Glenys. This is Mr Collis, you’re to take him to the refreshment area on the Third,’ orders Lee. ‘He’s meeting with Mrs Lister.’

‘All right…’ she squints at my label, ‘…Slomon, is it?’

‘Simon.’

‘I never seen it spelled like that. What is that, Jewish?’

‘Yes,’ I concur. Too out of it to explain.

‘Well I can hardly talk. Pot calling the kettle black,’ she inclines her chin with a wobble, indicating her name badge: Glenys Pryce-Gunn. She whips out the holstered object for my inspection. It is indeed a digital price gun. ‘Come on then, my lovely,’ she says, waving me on with the gun, ‘Down electricals, left on kitchenware, lifts and then up to fourth. Saves bothering with the escalators.’

‘So your name is actually Pryce-Gunn?’

‘Yes, luvvie. You ever been to Wales?’

‘Once.’

‘You know how they like to pair names with occupations, like Evans the Bread, Jones the Post and so on?’

‘Ye…es,’

‘Well they call me Pryce-Gunn the Price Gun.’

We move at speed past shelves artfully arranged with chrome steel and gun-metal casings which house the latest bleeping, flashing things. From time to time, Mrs Pryce-Gunn aims her weapon at one or other of these hi-tech objects and snaps off a shot. She checks the device’s built-in screen, presumably for correct and up-to-the-second product data, before giving a satisfied nod.

‘I used to be plain old Glenys Pryce on the tills before I married Terry Gunn. But being a modern woman like, I decided to keep my own name and became Pryce-Gunn. So, of course that was when they put me in Stock Control and handed me a price gun. Someone in management’s little joke, I suppose.’

‘Not to mention Lee Delaware, services,’

‘What about him?’

‘Like the well-known break-stop on the M4.’

‘Costa’s?’

 ‘Leigh Delamere, Services.’

‘Oh,’ she considers this dispassionately as we wait for the lift to the third floor. ‘Not quite the same though, is it?’

We ascend in silence. For some reason the notion of another staff member having a curious name seems to have annoyed her. I don’t care, I’m still in my happy bubble of Lexotan and booze.

The doors open onto the third floor, which sits directly below the enormous glazed ceiling held aloft by a complicated skeleton of blue girders. The entire floor is given over to fast-food booths from around the world and so we are instantly hit by a tsunami of aromas, none of which bears more than a passing resemblance to the genuine national cuisine represented.

Although it’s still early and the lunchtime booths are empty, the coffee and doughnuts place, Dough Boy’s, is heaving. But that’s only because of the size of the customers; there aren’t actually that many of them, but they are gargantuan and most have brought their own combined transport and seating system in the form of a mobility scooter, so the place feels crowded.

A tall woman with short iron-grey hair and a thin-lipped smile rises from a banquette, flapping a hand by way of acknowledgement. ‘Thank you, Mrs Pryce-Gunn,’ she says, dismissing my guide. ‘You must be Mr Collins.’ She indicates the single chair opposite her. ‘You’ve seen the data?’ she asks, without preamble and before I’ve even properly sat down.

Unwilling to be bullied or rushed I slowly park myself in the chair and place my briefcase on the table between us. As I flip open the lid to retrieve my briefing documents, Mrs Lister catches sight of my soggy bundled pants and chinos inside. A tiny crease appears at her forehead. ‘I’ve started to assess some of the data,’ I agree, ‘and there’s a definite anomaly in the sales patterns.’ I place the files on the table between us.

‘Well it doesn’t take a genius to figure out what’s causing the problem.’

‘Ah, well that’s where I disagree.’

‘So you believe yourself to be a genius then?’

‘No, that wasn’t what I…’

‘I already know what’s causing the problem and I’ve explained this to Head Office. There was no call to go to the trouble and expense of sending down a...a…,’ she looks me up and down. It’s evident that she doesn’t particularly like what she sees, ‘… someone like you.’

This is not the first time my abilities have been called into question. It’s never easy for me to explain how I do what I do since I don’t fully understand it myself.

I can identify minute disruptions in complex consumerist data patterns at the speed of a reasonable computer, but that’s the easy bit. The hard bit is blending multivariate analysis with intuition to account for the causes and effects of the anomalies. And being right on the button nine times out of ten. I’m a sort of corporate Mystic Meg really.

 ‘It’s the bloody demonstrators, obviously,’ announces Mrs Lister, emphatically folding her arms.

‘I don’t think so.’

‘They’re intimidating our customers.’

‘It’s a harmless old lady, a chinless wonder who doesn’t even want to be there and a hippy.’

‘She’s got a mouth on her like a sewer and there’s a dog as well.’

‘There’s a dog as well,’ I concede, ‘although I don’t think he’s a major player in the conspiracy.’

‘Are you being funny?’

‘No. Yes, sorry.’

‘You don’t seem to be taking this seriously. And you reek of alcohol, are you drunk?’

‘No, look, let me show you some of these figures.’ I tap the files and begin to flip through them until I find the chart I need. I place my finger underneath a series of numbers relating to last year’s first quarter apparel sales, ‘Now,’ I say, ‘if I could just explain why I think these are significant…’

Mrs Lister produces a pair of bifocals, which she affixes to her stony face before rising to her feet. The bifocals make her look even more humorless and intimidating as she looms over the table to examine the figures at the apex of my finger. I hear a sharp intake of breath. Mrs Lister is not, in fact, examining my numbers, instead, her attention is focused on my lap. Following her gaze I see that Bodger’s twine has come loose allowing the overlarge waistband of my new jeans to blouse outwards. The woman emits a curious hissing sound.

‘She claims you exposed yourself.’

 ‘I did no such thing.’

 ‘You appeared to be drunk.’

 ‘Not true either.’

 ‘And you had cocaine residue up your nostrils.’

 ‘Meringue crumbs.’

 ‘She also says that your briefcase was full of soiled underwear. Honestly, what the hell were you thinking?’ Down the phoneline Majeski’s outraged voice has ascended to the puppet pitch.

 ‘She didn’t give me a chance to explain.’

 ‘The cocaine, the booze or the flashing?’

 ‘The anomalies.’

 ‘That’s putting it mildly.’

 ‘The sales anomalies. You know what I mean.’

 ‘Go on then, Simon, I’m listening.’

 ‘She thinks it’s just down to the demonstrators. It’s not. It’s China. There’s something going on with imports from China.’

 ‘Wait. What demonstrators?’

 ‘A group of corporate greed protestors: three lunatics and a dog basically. An irrelevance. Nothing to worry about.’

 ‘OK, so, what’s your take?’

 ‘Newbury is just the tip of the iceberg. Sales are flat nationwide but where they’re really getting hit is imported goods from China. Across the board. It’s not obvious because it looks like a general slump but when you drill down the connection is China. It’s easy to miss because the figures are based on categories and not point of origin, it’s only when you… ’

‘Fuck.’

‘Fuck what?’

‘You’re sure about this, Simon?’

‘It’s just topline at the moment. I’d need more data to be really sure, but now that I know what I’m looking for…’

‘I’m about to tell you something super-confidential, Simon. So if it leaks I’ll know from where it came from and I’ll be forced to hunt you down and kill you.’

‘Then don’t tell me,’ I sigh. ‘I don’t want to know.’ I’m tired, I need a bath and my soggy pants and chinos are still balled up in my open briefcase.

‘At next month’s AGM in Atlanta Cy Beaglehole will be announcing that the Val-Mall is stepping up imports from China by around forty per cent.’

‘Well then, you’d better tell him to put the brakes on.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous. You’ve no idea of the time and money that’s already gone into this: literally hundreds of deals, months of negotiation at the highest levels, countless palms greased along the way. This is a juggernaut, Simon. The heavy goods vehicle of global commerce thundering down the fast lane with its lights flashing. The brakes won’t work because there are no brakes.’

I gaze down at my little pine desk, where my attention drifts to the collection of intricately detailed, hand-crafted Eringord characters. There’s Gorminhex, master of the Thief/Assassin’s guild with his hood of shadows and bone dagger; Parvis, the light-bringer with her diadem of sunbeams and outlandish curves; Thorgull, the berserker storm-bringer, armed with his mace of skulls and, of course, Sagwulf, Warrior/Mage with his mane of jet black hair and outlandish steroidal physique, to whom, in all fairness, Majeski does bear more than a passing resemblance. Apart from the voice, which is puppet-shrilling at me once again down the phone.

‘Did you hear what I said?’

‘No, sorry, you broke up for a moment.’

‘In about forty minutes I’m going to have to convince a very pissed off Doug MacFadden that you’re not in fact dangerous and are worth keeping on the payroll. I take it you do still want this gig?’

For a moment the idea that I won’t have to take crap from Tony Majeski ever again is hugely tempting. But then I look at the pile of unopened mail by the front door. Bills, most of it. Plus the rent on this one bedroom flat in Clapham, which is due in a week, and without the MacFadden Springer consultancy work I’m going to be hard pressed to survive for longer than another couple of months.

‘I do, Tony.’

‘Good. Because I want you to look into this China thing really carefully. I need you to one hundred per cent confirm. For now I’ve got to figure out how I’m going to convince Doug MacFadden that you’re an eccentric genius and not a degenerate sociopath.’

‘Thanks, Tony.’

‘You owe me.’

‘I do owe you,’ I say. ‘I’m very grateful as always.’

‘No, you really do owe me. I don’t want your gratitude, Simon, I want a quid pro quo. You owe me a favour. A big one.’

This is bad news. Tony’s favours always involve something disagreeable, like handing over rare and precious artifacts of runic power or having to go on field trips to Newbury.

‘All right, Tony,’ I sigh. ‘What do you want?’

‘I want you to get me my mana back.’

‘What?’ Now it’s my voice that’s gone puppet-shrill.

‘You heard me.’

‘You killed me, Tony. I don’t have any mana to give.’

‘I don’t want your mana, I want mine. All of it. Your job is to find that little shit and get my mana back.’

‘That’s impossible.’

‘Not my problem.’

‘Tony, be reas…’ Too late, Tony has already broken the connection.

I slam the phone down on my desk where Sagwulf hulks, grinning up at me, a great gurning, reptilian leer. I snatch him up, turning him in my fingers and consider hurling him against the wall. He’s made of some kind of dense plastic but I reckon I could sling him hard enough to smash. On the base it reads, “Made in China”. Of course it does.

I have no idea how to even begin tracking down this mana-thief. There are literally hundreds of thousands of players across the globe, all anonymous. To be fair though, this one’s definitely a Londoner and there are only a handful of Black-Mage players with Tony’s levels of power. That’ll narrow it down I suppose. But if and when I do identify him, what then? “Excuse me, but please could you give Tony his mana back? Hand it back or else.” I’ll get double-handed Pentangle Plosive Shock-Hexed into next Samhuin.

I was going to have a bath, instead I’m going to have to enter the Necromanticate and begin a brand new character: a lowly serf, with no experience, powers or mana, just a bifurcated shit-digging stick. With a heavy heart I open my laptop and a hundred-odd Mb of high speed access instantly connects me to the outside world. I gaze at the bundled up soggy chinos in my open briefcase; I really should get the laundry done first. Actually, sod it, I have no desire to spend the next eight hours burrowing for turnips on a medieval dung heap. Majeski can wait. On a whim I type the words Heavy Opposition into the search engine. Sure enough, somewhere near the bottom of the page is what appears to be a link to Heavenly’s website: hevvyopposition.com. I click on it. The page opens instantly and cleanly and I’m surprised to find that it’s all rather professional. There’s a masthead announcing the site name in what looks like steel blocks of machine type. The landing page is peppered with memes and high resolution images of various demonstrations. There’s even some video of Heavenly and a few similarly dressed eco-warriors being kettled in slo-motion. The audio features the beautiful and stately Bacarolle by Offenbach punctuated by a good deal of ambient swearing. Down the right hand side is a panel of text in the form of a manifesto, which I can’t be bothered to read.

Naturally, there are the usual links to various other like-minded groups including the notorious and fervently radical Extermination Revolution. I click on the Bio tab which reveals a mug shot of Heavenly looking pretty fervently radical herself in an old woolen beanie and leather jacket. By contrast, I’m amazed to see a smaller image of a group of costumed Craft enthusiasts at some Cosplayer event. The accompanying text reads: “taking time out with the RPG posse”. I examine the photo and at first I’m flummoxed, although there are a few players dressed as Parvis, Tintangel and Silva none of them is Heavenly. And then I see her, peering out from under a hood, gaze fixed on the camera. She’s playing Gorminhex, master of the Thief-Assassin’s guild.

I’m a bit hurt actually, given that I informed her that was an Apex-Level Thief-Assasin and she didn’t bat an eyelid. I scan the bio for more information but there’s nothing about the Craft, just lists of weird groups she’s been a member of and a record of arrests, which to be fair, is impressively extensive.

My mailbox pings. There’s a new message from Tony which reads simply, ‘Get your retarded head around this lot asap’. There’s a data transfer link which I click on, enter my password and await the torrent of information.

By the time I look up from the swirling figures on my screen I realize that the place is dark. Through my apartment window I can see illuminated streetlights and the moon is up over the skeletal outline of the trees on the other side of the road. I’ve lost all track of time while I’ve been immersed in the manifold patterns of supply chain data, revenue figures, volume and value sales from all of the Val-Mall’s UK stores over the past six months. I close down the final spread sheet, knowing that Tony’s not going to be pleased. I’ve got a long report to write, but that’s going to have to wait. I need food and I know there’s nothing in my fridge except a rancid, half-eaten macaroni cheese from Tesco and a half-litre of questionable milk. It’ll have to be a pizza. Anything but Chinese right now.

About forty minutes later, I’ve managed to put a wash on, filed my corporate card expenses and had a flick through the mail – all bills, when the doorbell buzzes. I cast around for some cash. Although I prefer to have my takeaways delivered, the process is not without its issues. These people don’t carry change, or least claim not to, so to avoid either under or over-tipping you need a ready source of shrapnel on hand. I keep a jar full of change for this very purpose, so I grab a couple of pound coins and a fifty pence piece for the tip. I bought a coffee on the train with a tenner and got a five-pound note back, so I know I had a fiver about me somewhere today. As a result, I’m expecting a swift, stress-free transaction: pizza for money. No waiting for change, no fussing for the tip, no surly indignation. Ideally, no social interaction whatsoever.

 The door buzzes repeatedly, persistently. The problem is that I’ve forgotten where I put that fiver. It’s not in my wallet, nor the briefcase. I check my pockets and realize that I’m wearing the sweat pants, which I put on the moment I walked in. It’ll be in the clown jeans which fortunately, didn’t make it into the wash for two reasons. First, they don’t need washing. Second, I never, ever want to see them again, let alone wear them, which is why they’re stuffed down the kitchen waste-bin.

 The buzz is now constant, like an angry wasp has got itself stuck down my earhole. I need to change it one of these days to something easier on the ear, something that gently chimes. I sprint to the front door, sliding the last foot across the floorboards in my stockinged feet.

 I’m expecting the pizza boy’s demeanour to match the enraged buzzing but the stocky young man at the door seems rather amused. ‘Took your time dincha?’ he says with a strong South London accent, ‘You been knocking one out or what?’

 I’m so shocked at this highly personal and completely unwarranted accusation that I can’t speak. My face instantly lights up and my throat closes. I stand there gulping and swallowing, my face glowing molten hot, looking like the guiltiest masturbator on the planet.

 ‘Busted,’ he says, grinning hugely. ‘Pizza and a wank. That’s what I’d call the perfect night in. Anyways, that’s one pepperoni, mozzarella, crusty base, which will set you back the pricely sum of four pound, ninety-nine pence, if you’d be so kind, my old mucka.’

This gurning, chirpy monster is so much more gruesome than the usual stroppy lowlife that I lose all reason and, instead of smirking laddishly and going along with the banter, I find myself attempting to mount a whiny, indignant defence. ‘I wasn’t…actually. If you must know, I was looking for my cash.’ This of course, only serves to make me appear guilty as charged.

‘Don’t stress about it. That’s a fiver for the pizza, squire and anything by way of a tip. For prompt service,’ he prompts.

 ‘Just one second.’ I turn and sprint for the kitchen.

‘Oy, you’re not planning to finish yourself off are you, mate? Only I gotta be at Lavender Hill in eight minutes otherwise they get the pizzas free and the shop’ll take it out of me wages.’

I upend the bin and grab the jeans, fingers scrabbling through the pockets. I’ve got to find this fiver, not because I give a hoot about his schedule or his docked wages but because I want him and his smutty allegations out of my life and doorway as fast as possible. There’s nothing in the back pockets. I give the ticket pocket a go because, although ticket pockets are weird and pointless, I do sometimes absent-mindedly slide the odd banknote into them. Sure enough I tweeze out a nice crisp piece of folded paper between finger and thumb.

Only it’s not a fiver. I unfold it and see that it’s a handwritten note. In chinese.

‘Oy, mate, leave it alone. I gotta go.’

I dig into the front left pocket and bingo, it’s the fiver. The face of Churchill gazes back at me, not with that familiar pugnacious bulldog scowl, but with a knowing, mildly disappointed expression. Like I’ve been caught wanking.

 ‘I wasn’t. So you can fuck off too, Winston,’ I mutter.

 ‘What? What was that, mate?’

 As I skid back into the living room area, I find that he’s actually entered my apartment and is examining the stuff on my desk, specifically, the Craft figurines. He has Parvis in his meaty paw, leering at her.

 ‘What’s all this stuff then?’

 ‘Put that down, please.’

 ‘Only looking, guv’nor.’

 ‘Here, take this and go please,’ I say, handing him the fiver along with the one pound, fifty in change.

To my relief he deposits the pizza box on my desk and gives me an ironic salute. ‘Enjoy,’ he says. At the door he suddenly turns. ‘Here, mate. I hope you don’t mind me giving you a piece of advice, but you really should get out more.’ He smiles to show that he means well. With that he’s gone; yet another pizza place that I’ll never be able to use again. Good thing that London’s fast food takeaway joints have the life expectancy of mayflies and new ones are constantly popping up to take their place, otherwise I’d starve.

I sit at my desk and open the box. Sure enough it’s a pepperoni and mozzarella on a crusty base, and it’s still hot. Where it falls short is the infestation of pineapple across its entire surface, like a rash of zits across a beautiful face. I didn’t order pineapple on my pizza. I never order pineapple. Pineapple has no business on a pizza. I sigh and begin picking it out, piece by piece, which is when I notice that Parvis is missing.

Chapt

Parvis comes to me in a dream. She’s beautiful and there is nothing but gentle understanding and the possibility of desire in those ice-blue eyes of hers. I try not to glance at her imposing breasts, superficially covered by the gauzy material of her bodice. Her glistening lips part as she glides towards me. ‘Simon, you’re a sad, lonely loser,’ she says in a throaty whisper. ‘And stop ogling my tits.’

 ‘I wasn’t,’ I reply, ‘I was looking for my cash,’ knowing full well what a dismal excuse this is. With ineluctable logic she transforms into a giant hornet and begins buzzing angrily. I try to swat her away with a tennis racquet but the strings have no tension, are rotten and have been shoddily repaired with Bodger’s old twine. As consciousness crowds in on me I understand that the angry buzzing is coming from my own front door. My clock shows nine a.m. I don’t get many visitors, especially at weekends, and for a moment I wonder if it’s the pizza boy back to return my Parvis, or more likely, to complain about his tip.

 The buzzer is replaced by an insistent hammering. I’m still in the sweat pants from the previous night so I launch myself straight out of bed and cautiously open the door with the security chain still attached. It’s Sagwulf. I’ve got Sagwulf brandishing the Obsidian Katana, crouched in the apartment hallway. To be fair, he cuts a magnificent figure in sable cloak, black leather jerkin, trews and armoured boots.

 ‘It’s the weekend for Christ’s sake and it’s early. What do you want?’ I ask.

 ‘Not just any Saturday, Simon. It’s Gathering Saturday. Come on you lazy fucker, get geared up, we’re off to ComicCon.’

 ‘Leave me alone, Tony. I’ve got things to do.’

 ‘Like what? Outside of work and the Craft, you have no life, Simon.’

 ‘I’ve got work. Your work as a matter of fact.’

 ‘I know you, Simon and I’m willing to bet you’ve already been through that data like a hot knife through butter. Come on, let me in and start getting ready.’

 ‘No.’ I close the door a fraction.

Tony raises the curved black sword. ‘Beware, I wield the Obsidian Katana. Your barriers mean nothing to me.’

 ‘Go away, Tony.’

 ‘Come on, Simon. You love this stuff. I’ve arranged a car for us and VIP passes.’

 I’m fully aware that this is not out of the goodness of his heart. The car is only so that he can pick my brains about the data on the way without me being able to charge for my hours. ‘No point. I’m out. I’m not a player any more. My character’s dead thanks to you, Tony.’

 ‘We can fix that. When you get me my mana back, come back as a serf and I’ll top you up. Give you some of those hacks and back-doors you’re always nagging me for. Get you back up to Apex-level before you can say Necromanticor.’

 ‘Yeah, when I get your mana back, which will be precisely never.’

 Tony’s breezy mood switches instantly. His eyes narrow. ‘I do not want to hear that, Simon. You owe me. I expect you to do it. I don’t care how or what it takes, but you do it. Clear?’

 I slam the door on him. But it’s only a momentary rebellion and it’s only so I can remove the security chain from the groove, but it does feel good for a nanosecond or so. When I open the door again I find Tony striking a pose on the mat, no doubt practicing his moves for the convention. He shakes his great mane of jet black hair, which has been carefully backcombed and lacquered for volume. ‘Come on, chop, chop. Get your shit together. I could murder a coffee.’

 ‘I’m not going, Tony,’ I say, heading for the kitchen. I’ve just put the kettle on when I’m suddenly grabbed in a chokehold from behind. Tony’s steroidal right bicep crushes my throat and is beginning to cut off my airway. ‘I can’t breathe,’ I wheeze. With his other hand he burnishes my scalp hard with his knuckles. It’s painful but should I object he’ll claim it’s all in fun, yet I can feel the underlying malice to this horseplay. I try to wriggle out but he’s incredibly strong from his daily workouts and I fear I’m about to pass out when he flings me to one side. I roll across the floor and crash into my kitchen table, upending it. I lie there gasping for breath.

‘Steady on, Simon. It’s only a bit of fun, mate.’ Tony rummages through my cupboards for the coffee things. I’m delighted to note that his perfect bouffant mane has been quite badly messed up in the struggle.

‘All right, Tony, I’ll go,’ I say, massaging my throat.

‘Nice one. Now where’s the bikkies?’

Although being wafted across London in a nice new Mercedes beats public transport hands down, I can’t say it’s been a fun journey. By the time we get to ExCel in Canning Town, Tony is apoplectic. ‘For Christ’s sake, why?’ he keeps asking.

 ‘I don’t know, Tony. I only know that something is negatively affecting sales of goods which originate from China. Currently, it’s mainly affecting apparel because practically all the Val-Mall’s clothes are made in China. But there are signs that whatever this is is beginning to impact household goods and electricals of Chinese origin. I can only see the effect at this stage, not the cause.’

 With our VIP passes the Mercedes is allowed to pull up right outside the main entrance, where photographers and newspeople await. With the Craft becoming such a phenomenon over the past two years, interest in The Gathering is no longer restricted to specialist publications and the gaming community, even the mainstream press are here today. Thankfully, Tony is distracted by the opportunity to throw some shapes for the cameras. He loves this. ‘We’ll talk later,’ he says, disembarking and instantly adopting Sagwulf’s distinctive, muscular crouch for the lenses. ‘Tony Majeski,’ he bellows, ‘Apex-Level Black Warrior-Mage and Sagwulf doppelganger.’

 I neglect to tell him that his hair is still completely mad and he more precisely resembles a burly crow who’s just stuck a finger into the light socket. I pull my thief-assassin’s hood down, cowling my face and slink away inside.

It’s odd, and almost certainly to do with the anonymity lent by the costume and its capacious hood, but I’m usually fairly comfortable at these kind of events. At any rate, I’m not burning with social anxiety or in desperate need of dropping a Lexotan. I keep them with me of course, just in case, in a leather pouch along with the hip flask hanging off my belt. I’ve even managed to catch up with a couple of mates. I say ‘mates’, even though we only see each other in the flesh once a year at this very event. The rest of the time it’s it’s exclusively online interaction, usually in the Necromanticate.

 I’m actually beginning to enjoy myself as I wander the hall nearest the Main Stage which is devoted to all things Eringordian. Everyone here is in costume, whether chanelling the masters like Thorgull and Gorminhex or the minor classic character types. I’m immersed in a comfortable universe of paladins, mages, thaumaturges, assassins, elven-folk, thanes and serfs, even a sprinkling of dwarvish miners including an ironic six-footer. The crowd suddenly surges towards the stage as the organisers open fire with T-shirt guns. A barrage of ComiCon T-shirts rains down on the excited multitude. With the crowd temporarily thinned I take the opportunity browse the stalls where more or less anything Craft-related can be purchased. There are world maps, manuals, spell-books, arcane enchantment inputs, skins, plug-ins and software patches or upgrades. Naturally, there’s a whole host of weaponry and magical paraphernalia; even a range of Eringordian bottled beers, ales, meads and spirits. At a figurine stall I briefly consider replacing my filched Parvis, but the ones for sale here are somewhat smaller and less inticiately detailed, so I decide not. Since The Gathering cosplay event is scheduled to take place on the Main Stage at one, I need to be mindful of time. Naturally, no self-respecting player wears a wristwatch when in costume so I rummage in my pouch for the purple crystaline cube, which displays both Eringordian time as well as GMT and is activiated by the warmth of your hand. That leaves me forty minutes to grab something to eat and get back, so I snake my way through the crowds to the cafeteria in the Northeast section of the venue. Here, the environment is shared with a mulitplicity of gamers, superheroes and cosplayers of all stripes, most in costume and all queuing ten-deep for the usual fast-food brands. There is, however, a booth billing itself, ‘Authentic Eringord Comestibles.’ I go for it, but only because the queue is more modest and moving quickly. The sloppy mis-spelled, hand-lettered menu doesn’t inspire confidence while the middle-aged hippy couple running it have made a laughably lazy attempt at outfitting themselves: the man wears a shapeless lilac tunic and has a limp red scarf draped over his head, which I assume is meant to be a serf’s hood, but only makes him look like a cross-dresser impersonating the queen. The woman has on some kind of sack-dress and a witch’s hat. ‘Hail, good fellow, well met. And how may I serve thee?’ she asks in an odd Bristolian falsetto.

 It’s awful. Nobody talks like this in the Craft and no character has ever even remotely resembled these two. My face-beacon has been well and truly triggered by the exchange, I can feel the heat already building up inside my hood. It’s not fair, these two are utterly without shame, blithely making complete arses of themselves and yet I’m the one crippled with embarrassment. I point to an insipid-looking pasty and, as soon as it’s been dumped onto a paper plate along with a dollop of mashed turnip, fling my cash at them and run. ‘Felicitations and thrice blessings of the Necrophiliac go with thee. Help thyself to ketchup,’ she warbles. That is just so wrong, I can’t even begin to describe the many levels on which it fails.

I collect a plastic knife and fork from the cutlery station and a weedy-looking young Thorgull, recognising my getup, waves me over to his table. Ordinarily, I’d find a place to eat on my own but all the tables are packed, and rather than sitting with random gamers and cosplaying superheroes, I wander over. He duly budges up on his bench.

‘Cheers,’ I give him a grateful nod.

 ‘Heil og sael,’ he replies.

 I cut into my pasty in silence, refusing to indulge him. The pasty oozes brown sludge.

 ‘Should’ve gone for the KFC,’ he announces, popping a chicken nugget into his snaggle-toothed gob. ‘I may be a berserker but I’m not bloody mental. If that was genuine Eringord food, the entire Necromanticate would be dead in a week.’

 ‘True,’

 He looks me over, taking in my authentic garb before giving a nod of approval. I’d bloody well hope so too, given that this stuff has set me back a small fortune over the years. I had to send off to the States for the calf-skin belt and boots, whilst the cowl is genuine Merino wool. His own outfit, on the other hand, is mostly sheepskin offcuts, which his mum’s probably cobbled together for him. Also, I don’t recall Thorgull the Berserker, Storm Bringer and Terror of the Ice Kingdom ever needing to wear milk-bottle spectacles.

‘Thief-Assassin, yeah? What level?’

 ‘Apex,’ I reply over a forkful of pasty. Actually, it’s not that bad and tastes no worse than the standard Cornish version.

 ‘You’re kidding,’ he gapes, dropping a chip.

 I grin under my cowl. Finally, a bit of respect. ‘Nope, been at the Craft for nearly four years, ever since the game came out. Made Apex two years back. My partner’s an Apex-Level Black Mage, between us we reckoned we’d have accumulated enough mana by the end of the year to make a play for the Necromanticor.’

 ‘Seriously?’ The berserker goggles at me. The heavy specs have slipped down his nose, he pushes them back up with a ketchup-smeared finger. ‘I didn’t even think that was possible.’

 I’m beginning to warm to him. ‘Oh, it’s possible, all right. Major gamble though. Get it wrong or miscalculate, then you’re done: toast. You lose control of your character and it becomes an AI, one of the Necromanticor’s creatures.’

 ‘Christ, and you’re actually gonna do it?’

 ‘Well…’ I say, unwilling to admit that I’ve been Shock-Hexed by my bastard partner and have no mana, experience or level status whatsoever, only a ferociously overpriced outfit.

 ‘Funny, you’re the second Apex-Level player I’ve seen today. You’re like buses, I never expected to meet one, even online, but then two come along at the same time.’

 ‘Really?’ I expect he’s come across Tony, bounding about the place, posturing with his katana and blowing off about his achievements.

 ‘Yeah, Valentine. He’s sitting a couple of tables away. Youngest Apex Level Black-Mage there’s ever been. Younger than me actually.’ He indicates a group of noisy youths in jeans and t-shirts about ten yards from us. At first glance it’s just an average bunch of teens, laughing and flinging chips at one another. It soon becomes evident though that the table’s centre of gravity is a saturnine young man with a Hoxton fin. He wears a black t-shirt emblazoned with the words ‘I SHAT ON THE NSA’ in solid white type under a graphic of a spy. There’s a confidence and a stillness about him and its clear that the antics of his companions are really designed to impress him in some way or other.

 ‘The kid in the black t-shirt?’

 ‘That’s him. Valentine.’

 ‘I shat on the NSA?’

 ‘That’s not a ‘T’, it’s a ‘1’. I s.h.a one on the NSA.’

 ‘What the hell is that supposed to mean?’

 ‘S.h.a one is a cryptogtaphic hash function. It means he’s been able to defeat the National Security Agency. Clever,’ he guffaws, blasting me with a gust of sour breath.

 ‘He shat on them?’

 ‘Yeah, basically. It’s hilarious.’

 ‘Is it?’

 ‘Hacker joke.’ The goggle-eyed Thorgull is looking at me with a good deal less awe now simply because I don’t happen to find this scatological hacker double-entendre as gut-bustingly amusing as he does. What’s more, the authentic berserker breath on him has completely put me off my pasty. Time to go.

I gather up my plate and get to my feet. I’m pretty certain that this Valentine is our mana thief and I need to work out how I’m going to approach him. Certainly not while surrounded by his boisterous minions.

 ‘You bastard, Simon, you might have told me I looked like fucking Beetlejuice.’

 Oh God, it’s Tony. His bellowing has stunned the surrounding tables to silence for a moment.

I turn to find him posed directly behind me in an aggresive Sagwulf power stance, playing up to the crowd. ‘Tony Majeski,’ he announces, ‘Black-Mage, Apex Level.’ His mane is now immaculate and I hear more than a few admiring comments from the onlookers before a ripple of applause breaks out. To my horror, I realize that they think it’s a piece of impromptu theatre, a ghastly occurrence that’s become all too common at these events, where two characters publically challenge one another before embarking on a lame, badly choreographed mock duel with plastic weapons and rubbish pyrotechnics. Under the hood my face surges to maroon-alert. Tony, basking in the attention, reaches over his shoulder and unsheathes the Obsidian Katana from the scabbard on his back. With his other hand he delves into his belt pouch and produces a tiny white paper object. He flings it at my feet, where it makes a sharp little crack. Tony’s just thrown a Fun Snap at me; the crowd roars its approval as though he’s produced a string of genuine Weir Balls.

This is my worst nightmare, and Tony knows it. I gaze around in a panic, drop the plate, spin on my heel and run, cloak billowing out behind me.

I don’t stop until I see an emergency exit. I crash through the double doors to a first floor fire escape and slump against the wall, gasping for breath. It’s the onset of a major anxiety attack. I scrabble in my leather pouch for a Lexotan and hurl it down my throat, struggling to swallow without water. I shove my face into the open pouch and breath in my own exhalations. This is because in a fight or flight overreaction – and this is very much the latter - my system has over-oxygenated itself and I have to compensate by inhaling Carbon Dioxide.

Within a few minutes although I’m functioning again, I’m not ready to go back inside. Besides, the exit doors have slammed shut and I’ve locked myself out. I consider going home but it’ll have to be in a cab since public transport dressed like this is completely out of the question. I’m reviewing my options when the double doors swing open.

It’s Valentine. Unlike me, he’s smart enough to wedge the doors open with a backpack before fully emerging onto the metal fire escape. For a second he seems momentarily taken aback to find someone else out here; he recovers and gives me an affable nod. ‘All right, mate?’

The distinctive South London twang confirms it: it’s the voice of the dwarf with the teaspoon. He reaches for the rolled-up cigarette he has tucked behind his ear, licks it then fires it up. He gazes at me as he inhales, direct and unwavering.

The silence is becoming uncomfortable and it’s me who breaks it. ‘You’re Valentine.’ It’s not a question.

‘That’s my handle, not my actual name.’

‘You nicked my mate’s mana.’ I’m aware that absolutely none of that statement is true, but it is, at least, direct.

Valentine laughs. ‘What, the Black-Mage twat? He’s your mate?’

‘Well, I say “mate”, he’s more of a…’

‘Ah,’ he says, as though he’s just solved a complex crossword clue, ‘that was him inside just now.’

‘That was him, yeah. Tony Majeski.’

‘Impressive costume.’

‘He prides himself on his authenticity.’

‘I see that. Except he’s not really a Black-Mage any more, is he? You can’t be a Black-Mage with zero mana.’

‘Yes, well, I was hoping to talk to you about that.’

Valentine takes another drag and grins. ‘Not a problem. He can have it all back. I don’t care.’

‘Really?’

‘Yeah, really. I’m not that bothered, I was just messing about really.’

‘Wow, that’s…’

‘Five grand.’

‘What?’

He crushes the butt into the steel guardrail. ‘You heard, five grand. I’ll meet your mate in Eringord and he can have it all back.’

‘That’s blackmail. You’re blackmailing him.’

‘I prefer to think of it as blackmaging,’ Valentine produces a thin-lipped smile at his own joke.

‘Five grand,’ I splutter, ‘that’s ridiculous.’

He shrugs, ‘No problem, I’ll keep it. I don’t play that much but it’s sort of fun to be an Apex-Level.’

‘How old are you?’

He narrows his eyes at me and reaches into his pocket for a small metal tin. He opens it to reveal his cigarette fixings and begins deftly rolling another tight little cylinder.

‘I could have the law on you.’

Valentine laughs showing surprisingly brown teeth. Most likely from all the roll ups. ‘Good luck with that.’

Even I’m aware how pathetic a threat that was. I decide to appeal to his better nature. ‘Come on, Valentine, Tony’s been at it for five years to accumulate that much mana. He lives for the game. I’m sure he’d be happy to come to some kind of arrangement with you.’

Valentine lights up again. ‘Loves the Craft, does he?’

‘More than anything really. Except maybe his job.’

‘Fair enough,’ he announces, ‘six grand then.’

‘What?’

‘You’re a twat, you do know that, don’t ya?’ He blows a stream of smoke at me; he doesn’t bother to wait for a response. ‘I hope you’re not a poker player, ‘cos you just flashed me all your cards. If your mate Tony loves the Craft so much, then he’ll pay five for his mana. I’ve tacked on another grand ‘cos he’s a cunt.’

‘That is true,’ I sigh, ‘but he won’t pay six grand.’

‘Thought he was your mate?’

I shake my head. ‘No, I hate him actually. He dusted me before you got to him. Completely killed off my character with a double-handed Pentangle Plosive Shock-Hex in the back, the bastard.’

‘I don’t know what that is, but it sounds like a cunt’s trick.’ He offers me a drag on his roll-up. I don’t usually smoke but I give it a go. The tobacco is harsh and induces an instant coughing fit. ‘Tell you what,’ he announces when I finally recover, ‘why don’t I sell you the mana instead? You can have it for two grand; you sell it on to him for whatever you can make.’

‘It’s tempting but Tony would only force me to give it all back to him for nothing.’

‘And why would you do that?’

‘I work for him. Awful place called McFadden Springer.’

Valentine crushes the butt on the rail. ‘That’s the problem with the corporate world. It’s people like your mate who ruin it. That’s why you’ll never catch me slaving in some office.’

‘You’re not old enough to work, you can’t be more than fifteen.’

‘Sixteen actually. Awarded myself a Masters degree from Imperial College before I even left school.’

‘That’s not even possible.’

‘You have no idea what’s possible.’ Valentine’s mood has transformed from affable to deadly serious in an instant and he’s reverted to that unwavering stare.

‘OK,’ I say, ‘You’re a hacker. You shitted on NASA. Well done.’

‘The NSA actually, and yeah, I cracked ‘em. But that was just for fun. The other stuff is for the money. Speaking of which, what do you wanna do?’

‘I’ll give it a go but Tony’ll never buy it.’

Valentine digs into the back pocket of his tight black jeans and produces an expensively printed matt-black business card. The only splash of colour is a small embossed heart with an arrow through it and a simple address: hackysac.com. ‘It’s a chatroom,’ he explains, ‘don’t worry, it’s not dark web. Leave a message for Valentine and I’ll get back to you. Here’s the way it needs to work: Firstly, it’s gotta be cash. I’ll meet your mate in Eringord, as soon as I get a message that the cash has been handed over, I’ll transfer the mana. You can decide where to leave the cash, so long as it’s a public place. You’ve got forty-eight hours.’ He recovers his backpack and disappears inside, leaving the double doors to clang firmly shut on me again.

Andy Warhol predicted that in the future everyone would get fifteen minutes of fame. Tony got about two seconds. There was a brief shot of him on the evening news in a short segement on ComiCon, although he was wrongly identified as a Thundercat. To be fair though, the cabbie who drove me home insisted on referring to me as Knob-in-Hood and relentlessly took the piss all the way to Clapham. He did not get a tip.

I’ve spent most of the evening googling hackers’ chatrooms and the dark web and it’s scary stuff. I haven’t actually tried to enter the dark web itself, only read up on it. From what I can see its like using a Ouija board - merely by accessing it you can open yourself up to all manner of bad things and the strong likelihood of attack. It’s a parallel universe inhabited by evil bastards and opportunists. I’m trying to work up the energy to call Tony and give him the news but I know it’ll end up ruining my night. Just as I decide to send out for a curry my mobile sounds off with the five note polyphonic trumpet call of Eringord.

 ‘Did you you catch me on the news?’ brays Tony.

 ‘I did.’

 ‘Go on then, what d’you reckon?’

 ‘They thought you were a Thundercat.’

 ‘They described me as leonine.’

 ‘Lion-O. They called you Lion-O. That’s a Thundercat.’

 ‘That’s the green-eyed monster right there, Simon. You really ought to get a life you know, then you wouldn’t be so envious when another player gets a bit of attention.’

 ‘Uh, this is a very noisy line, Tony.’

 ‘That’s because I’m in the pub.’

 ‘You’re not still in costume are you?’

 ‘Naturally, and basking in the adulation that comes with being in the national spotlight. This lot are loving it, aren’t you?’

 There are raucous cheers and woops on the line in response to the question. I can visualise it: full-on Sagwulf Tony propping up the bar of the White Horse in Parson’s Green surrounded by a pack of his stylish, wealthy mates. I’d never have a fraction of the chutzpah required to pull of something like that. Perhaps he’s right, perhaps I am a little envious.

 ‘I have some news.’

 ‘You what?’

 ‘I have some news,’ I bellow.

 ‘Oy, shut it,’ yells Tony. The background noise on the line decreases to a normal level. ‘Do I really want to hear this?’ he asks warily.

 ‘It’s sort of good news and bad news.’

 ‘Go on then.’

 ‘The good news is that I located the mana thief. He was there at ComiCon; I managed to have a chat with him.’

 ‘And the bad news is that he thinks he’s gonna keep the mana?’

‘No, he’s happy to return it.’

‘So what’s the bad news?’

‘For five, no, six grand.’

Tony is silent. I know he’s still there though because I can hear his heavy breathing on the line and the general hubbub in the background.

‘Tony?’

‘For fuck’s sake, Simon. That is well out of order.’

‘It’s a take it or leave it situation. You’ve got forty-eight hours to make up your mind.’

‘Who does this little twat think he is?’

‘He’s the little twat with all the cards, well, all the mana. The thing is, he doesn’t even want it. He’s not interested in the Craft, he just wants the money.’

‘Why six? You said five, then six, how come?’

‘I may have negotiated him upwards, Tony.’

‘I’m not even going to ask how that happened. This is blackmail, I’ll have the law on him.’

‘Actually, he did joke about blackmaging you.’

‘Oh lovely, Simon. You and your little extortionist chum having a nice laugh at my expense was it? I hope you enjoyed the joke, because it’s going to cost you.’

‘That’s not how…’

‘Right, I want his name and address now.’

‘I can’t do that. He’s a hacker, very cagey and goes by an alias.’

‘He’ll be going by crutches when I’ve done with him.’ This last bellowed comment elicits a round of background cheers. Tony’s words are slightly slurred and it’s evident that he’s playing to his audience as usual. ‘So what’s this alias and how do we get hold of him?’

‘He calls himself Valentine.’

‘Valentine what? Day? Card? What?’

‘Just Valentine. You leave a message for Valentine in a chatroom. But if you’re going for it, Tony, you’re gonna need to get on with it. It has to be cash and he wants it handed over in a public place. He said you’ve got forty-eight hours or the deal’s off.’

‘Oh, I’ll go for it all right. Gimme five, I’ll get back to you.’ With that the connection is broken.

Tony’s reaction has been more reasonable than I expected, certainly there were fewer recriminations, most likely because he’s had a few drinks. As far as I’m concerned, I’ve done my bit now. When he calls back I plan to give him the details of the chatroom and leave it at that. I use the time to order in from the curry place on North Street. This is one of my long-term relationships so I don’t anticipate trouble. I always have the same thing: two chicken tikka starters which I have as a main with a vegetable jalfrazi on the side. It’s a family-run business with a very low staff turnover, as a result, the delivery people are used to me and know to ring once and drop off my order outside the door; the money I simply tuck under the doormat along with a generous tip.

It’s more like fifteen minutes when Tony does call back and he’s noticeably more pissed and excitable. ‘Simon, Simey, Simo,’ he bellows. ‘Simon the sly man, Simon the spy man.’

‘What is it, Tony?’

‘We’ve come up with a plan.’

‘Good for you. Have you got a pen?’

‘I’ve got a pint and a packet of pork scratchings, s’all I need right now.’

‘You might want to write down the name of the chatroom.’

‘No need, mate.’

‘You might forget, Tony. To be honest you sound like you’ve had a few drinks.’

‘I may have had a Stella or trois. But no matter, I’m not going to be doing it, you are.’

‘No, Tony. I’ve done my bit.’

‘Have you got a pen?’

‘For fuck’s sake.’

‘Here’s the deal, so write this down carefully. I want the mana first, so your mate is gonna have to meet me in Eringord before he gets the cash. Forest of Shalewind, Eastern Kingdom, tomorrow at eight p.m. And that’s GMT. Now if I get my mana you can tell him the 6K is agreed. The handover will be at Southside Wandsworth car park at 10 p.m.’

‘That’s not going to happen.’

‘Why not?’

‘He wants the exchanges to take place at the same time. Basically, you’ll get the mana when he knows you’ve handed over the cash.’

‘How the hell’s that supposed to work?’

‘Somebody needs to be online to collect the mana at the same time as you do the handover. I’ll do that bit if you want.’

‘Oh, you’d just love that, Simon, the chance to play an Apex-Level Black Mage. No way am I giving you my login.’

‘You’re not an Apex-Level Black Mage, Tony, just a serf with a stick. Same as me.’

‘I’m still not giving you control of my character. No, Spyman, you’re my black ops specialist. You’re going to be doing the cloak and dagger stuff.’

I can hear his mates in the background cheering ironically and drunkenly chanting “Spyman”. ‘No way,’ I say slowly and emphatically.

‘Fair enough, mate. Don’t do it, but you’ve cost me an extra grand here, so how’s about I dock that thousand from your next invoice instead?’

‘That’s not fair, Tony.’

‘Life’s not fair. It’s not fair that your little chum stole my mana, but you don’t hear me complaining, do you?’

In my experience that’s practically all Tony does do but it doesn’t change the fact that he’s got me over a barrel here. I’m more or less entirely reliant on him and MacFadden Springer for my income these days. ‘All right, I’ll do it. He can pick it up from my flat.’

‘Nah. I told you, I want it done at Southside Wandsworth. It’s the NCP car park. Fourth Floor. Let’s say 8 p.m. tomorrow night.’

‘I hope you’re not messing about, Tony. This Valentine is young but I think he’s very smart. He’s a hacker and he’s dark web.’

‘You forget, I’m a Black Mage.’

‘I realise that, Tony,’ I say, trying to keep my patience and correspondingly, my job. ‘What I’m saying is, I think this kid is capable of some very bad stuff.’

‘Oh golly, I’ve just shitted myself. Oh, wait a minute, no I haven’t. I’ve just remembered I’m a grown man we don’t usually do that when threatened by spotty-faced schoolboys.’

‘So you are actually going to pay this kid?’

 ‘Absolutely, Simon. I’m going pay… and then he’s going to pay.’ A drunken roar of approval greets this last statement. I can imagine Tony soaking it up along with yet another pint of Stella. I just know that he and these braying idiots have cooked up something utterly pathetic and I’m about to be the fall guy.

‘You still there Spyman?’ Tony’s voice come back on the line after a few more moments.

‘Yes,’ I sigh.

‘Right, you set it up with your mate. I’ll send a car with the cash for you at seven-thirty tomorrow. Do not cock it up and try not to get mugged.’

I catch a gale of background mirth before the call ends abruptly.

It’s late but I decide to spend a bit of time lurking in the hackysac chatroom, just to get a feel of the place and its denizens. It doesn’t help. These people all communicate in an alien tongue, one that’s only partially recognizable and more or less composed of acronyms, jargon and clumps of numbers. Thankfully, I don’t have to become a member to post. I headline my message “Valentine” and quickly type out the details of tomorrow’s double exchange. I have a few more work notes to go through before turning in so I keep the hackysac window open on my desktop. Sure enough, within a few minutes I see that Valentine has posted his response. It’s so prompt that I guess he must have some kind of word or name recognition set up that alerts him instantly to messages with his name attached. He’s written simply: “Tony Majeski terms. Agreed.” He signs off with an icon of a small red heart. It’s a bit of a worry, since of course it was me who blurted out Tony’s name this morning. Most normal people wouldn’t pick up on details like that. I’m no expert, but I should imagine that letting an experienced hacker have your real name is probably not a good thing. Especially if you’re going to bugger him about, and I’d put serious money on the likliehood of Tony doing precisely that. About six grand in fact.

Chapt

I’ve been hard at Tony’s report since eleven this morning. Other than a couple of tea breaks and twenty minutes spent downing some beans on toast, I haven’t stopped. Naturally, I’ve had to examine all the available national data for a second time in depth, taking particular care to cross reference. There’s no doubt about it, over the past eight months there has been a significant and unequivocal decline in sales of clothing imported from China. Although less marked, the fall-off is now beginning to extend to electronic goods. Although I can’t absolutely confirm it I’m beginning to suspect that the phenomenon may be specific to a particular demographic – sixteen to thirty-year olds, Millennials and a chunk of Gen Z. Where specific customer information is available via the discount schemes and the V.M.VIP Club Card program, there’s good evidence that this age group is no longer purchasing apparel at the Val-Mall. Analysis of the individual clothing lines reveals that whilst sales of fashion items manufactured in Central Europe, the US and India are holding steady, sales of imported clothes from China have completely stalled. I can see it, but I can’t account for it, and from what Tony’s told me about the Val-Mall’s impending import strategy this is nothing short of a ticking time bomb.

The report stretches to well over thirty pages; I’ve taken pains to spell out my findings in detail and with crystal clarity so the report can speak for itself. This is because I desperately want to avoid being hauled into another meeting at McFadden Springer. I send a soft copy to Tony’s office email. By the time I print out the hard copy and place it in a plastic sleeve ready for delivery, it’s just after seven p.m. I put on sweat pants and an anorak and grab my wallet and mobile: not exactly black ops gear but then handing over some cash to a sixteen year-old in a car park is hardly what I’d call mission impossible. At precisely seven-thirty my phone pings to inform me that there’s an Uber outside.

I climb into the back seat of a slightly whiffy Toyota Prius and, without comment, the driver reaches round and passes me a small nylon drawstring bag. Other than for the occasional sneer in the rear view mirror and some weird phlegm-clearing noises, the entire journey passes in stony silence. I give him five stars.

I’ve been dropped off on the fourth floor of the NCP, this being a Sunday the shopping centre is long closed so the place is eerily silent and more or less empty of cars. I watch the Uber slowly drive away with a feeling of unease. Technically, this is a public place but there’s little evidence of the general public, which is a bit worrying should anything go awry - like me getting mugged. I’ve got two pressing concerns here, one: that I’m standing in a silent deserted car park carrying a bag full of cash, and two: Tony’s pulled a stunt and I’m standing in a silent deserted car park not carrying a bag full of cash.

It certainly feels like there’s half a dozen tight bundles of banknotes in there but I’d like to be sure. The drawstring has been tied with some form of Gordian knot, which I have just set about unpicking when I hear a single ‘ting’. I spin round to find that three youngsters astride BMX stunt bikes have managed to line up silently behind me. They wear the standard urban uniform of jeans, hoodies and backpacks; though it’s dark, each sports wraparound sunglasses and a bandana to mask their features. The one in the middle wearing a red bandana extends his hand and, with a flap of his fingers, gestures for me to hand over the bag.

I’d be the first to encourage silence in cab drivers and delivery people, but it’s pretty unsettling in a gang of masked youths. ‘I need to know who you are first,’ I announce, shocking myself with my own nerve. And, whilst it’s not in my job description to get duffed senseless or sliced into strips, I’m not about to hand over six grand in cash to just anyone.

‘What d’ya reckon the scarves are for?’ asks red bandana.

‘So’s I can’t identify you, I suppose.’

‘So why the fuck would we tell you who we are, you plum?’ The words echo around the empty space.

‘Fair point. Maybe you can tell me who you work for.’

‘I do Saturdays at Greggs,’ he replies, to the mild amusement of his mates. ‘It’s shit though,’ he adds unnecessarily before removing his backpack. He produces a short matt-black tubular object from inside, which he aims at me.

‘Ok, ok. No need for that,’ I say, backing away. I sling the bag to him, it skids over the concrete where it is retrieved by his left-hand man.

‘Shitting it over the pump action are ya?’ He jerks his right arm sharply back and forth and a hiss of air escapes from the tip of the tube. ‘Calm down, bro. We ain’t come for an off. I got a dodgy valve on the back tyre,’ he explains, before kneeling and applying his pump to the rear wheel of the BMX. ‘Val don’t like violence. S’long as you haven’t messed him about, it’s all good.’

The one holding the bag is struggling with the knot, he gives up and kneads the fabric instead. ‘I dunno,’ he says, ‘but it kinda feels right.’ With that, he removes his backpack as the does the third. Now all three huddle for a moment in a brief game of pass the parcel after which they put on their packs and remount their bikes. The bag has gone into one of those backpacks but I have no idea which.

Red bandana produces a phone and begins texting, no doubt a message to Valentine. ‘Cheers then, geezer,’ he says affably and pockets the phone. Suddenly there’s a sharp squeal of tyres from the floor above us. ‘Shit,’ he hisses. The three of them take off, pedaling hell for leather past me. Instead of continuing down the concrete ramp to the floor below they turn sharply and ride expertly down the stairs. I see now why they came on stunt bikes. A white Range Rover with a vanity plate reading JAM 28, swings down the ramp from the upper floor and skids to a halt, just missing me. The driver’s window slowly descends, a figure in a sinister-looking ski mask leans out. ‘Are you Spyman?’

‘Simon.’

‘Same diff. Get in quick.’

Evidently this is one of Tony’s drinking buddies engaged in whatever half-witted mission they cooked up last night. I’d be wise to stay clear of the whole thing and I only comply because I’m going to need a lift home. I hop into the back.

‘How’s it going, Spyman? I’m Nigel,’ announces the bobble-hatted passenger, twisting in his seat to extend his hand. He’s about thirty with a ruddy complexion and a friendly grin. He reeks of stale booze.

‘Incognito, Nige,’ warns the driver.

‘Bit late now, he’s already seen my face, hasn’t he?’

‘That’s because you’re not wearing a ski mask, like we agreed.’

‘I told you, I don’t have a ski mask. Just the bobble hat. It’s what I wear for skiing, Jamie.’

‘Now you’ve identified me, you complete arse.’ Jamie irritably floors the accelerator, the car skids around the remaining levels, tyres screaming as these two continue to bicker away. Pretty soon we’re hurtling down the final ramp, achieving a foot or so of air and land with an almighty clatter of tortured metal. As we straighten out we catch sight of the fleeing bikers approaching the exit barrier.

Jamie’s red-rimmed eyes observe me in the mirror. ‘All right, Slyman, which one do we go after?’

‘How do I know?’

His eyes narrow. ‘Which one’s got the bag, you twit?’

‘I have no idea.’

The bikers flow around the barrier and once clear of the exit, cycle off in three different directions.

‘Come on, Slyman, they’re splitting up.’

‘Honestly, I couldn’t tell you. They did a pass-the-parcel thing so I didn’t see who ended up with it.’

We screech to a halt just before the exit barrier in a cloud of smoking rubber. ‘Shit, I need to validate,’ shouts Jamie, clutching his ticket and exiting the vehicle at a run. Nigel and I stay put and watch while Jamie dashes about desperately searching for a pay machine. Eventually he locates one over by the stairs. ‘Anyone got a two-pound coin?’ he bellows across the empty level.

Nigel turns out his pockets and shrugs.

Jamie lopes back towards us, ‘Fuck,’ he shouts, angrily wrenching off his ski mask, ‘it’s a monumental balls-up. And I’m too hung over for this.’

‘Incognito, mate,’ warns Nigel.

‘Oh, shut up,’ snaps his partner, slicking his ruffled hair back with both hands. Jamie has a long thin face and an aquiline nose, which matches his patrician manner. I have him pegged as a City-type. ‘How the fuck are we going to get out of here?’ he sighs.

‘You can pay with your phone,’ I suggest.

Jamie grimaces. ‘Didn’t bring ‘em. Black ops rules. No wallet, no phone. Nothing that could identify us, and we’re both supposed to be wearing masks,’ he emphasizes pointedly for Nigel’s benefit.

‘I’ll pay,’ I sigh, producing my mobile. ‘On two conditions.’

‘Name them.’

‘One. You give me a lift home. Two: you stop calling me Slyman, Spyman, Pieman or any other variation on the theme. It’s pathetic and very annoying. My name is Simon.’

‘Done,’ agrees Jamie.

‘And you’re hardly going to be incognito in a car with a vanity plate.’

‘Personalized plate if you don’t mind. Set me back three and half large.’

‘Whatever,’ I say, as I exit the vehicle. I’ve just reached into my pocket for my phone when it rings. It’s Tony.

‘Tony here,’ he says briskly and without preamble. ‘Is Jamie with you?’

‘He is as a matter of fact.’

‘Let me speak to him.’

I offer the phone to Jamie, ‘It’s Control,’ I say, rolling my eyes.

Jamie takes the phone and emits a series of clipped ‘yahs’ presumably in response to the barrage of questions. Finally, he responds with a hesitant, ‘Ah… no. Not exactly.’ Jamie grimaces before passing the phone back, ‘He wants to speak to you.’

‘Simon, what the fuck went wrong?’ shrills Tony.

‘Nothing went wrong. I handed over the bag like we agreed. There were three kids on bikes. They left; your mates show up like the Dukes of Hazard. Actually, more like the Duke of Edinburgh, skidding about in a bloody great Range Rover.’

‘Those kids got the money though?’

‘Yes. That was the general idea.’

‘That wasn’t the plan at all. Trust you to balls it up. We’ll speak tomorrow.’ He hangs up.

‘Oh dear,’ announces Jamie. ‘He’s not best pleased.’

‘Well I don’t see why not. I did my bit.’

‘Yah, but you were supposed to keep an eye on the money, so we could chase it down and get this little Valentine fucker.’

‘Sounds like a foolproof plan, except for the part about letting me in on it and of course the need to escape and evade a public carpark. But then who could possibly have predicted that?’

‘It made a lot of sense last night, to be fair, we were all pretty squiffo.’

‘Speaking of which, I’m feeling a bit car sick. All that swerving and such,’ announces Nigel, before promptly puking out of the window.

I leap out of the way and head for the pay machine so we can all get the hell out of here.

Chapt

There’s only one email in my inbox this morning but it’s titled ‘Urgent’ with multiple exclamation marks. Naturally, it’s from Tony. I fortify myself with a strong black coffee and some toast before I can summon up the strength to open it. It reads simply: Meeting. Mac Spring. 2 p.m. sharp. Be there. T.

Shit. That’s precisely what I was trying to avoid. Normally I’d ring Tony and try to wheedle my way out of it but I know I’ll only get an earful about how I ballsed it all up last night and cost him six grand for nothing. Even though meetings at MacFadden Springer are the absolute worst, today that option seems to be the lesser of two evils.

I open up my report and quickly begin to summarise the main headlines into a PowerPoint presentation. I’m staying one step ahead of Tony today. There’s nothing he likes more than making me attend a MacFadden presentation and invariably, five minutes before it starts he drops the bombshell that I’m the one doing the presenting. Not today, though Majeski. Not today.

I’m sitting in MacFadden Springer’s reception, which is all Barcelona chairs, orchids, moulded glass and subtle uplighters. At precisely five minutes to two the Pencil appears, clacking her way across the Ash Wood flooring. ‘Mr Collier?’ she says, sneering down at me through her lemon specs as though I might be some kind of faecal matter stuck to her four-inch block heels. I know she’s pretending to have forgotten my name.

‘That’s me,’ I agree, to avoid giving her the satisfaction, ‘Collier by name, Collier by nature,’ I add jauntily. I don’t know why I’ve said this, I think possibly to throw her.

Her eyes narrow as she considers. Finally she gives me a thin-lipped smile. ‘Step this way please.’

The Pencil walks me to the fancy boardroom, which is already occupied by the entire Val-Mall account team including Doug MacFadden himself in the power position at the head of the long gleaming table. She stops briefly to whisper something in MacFadden’s ear before clacking over to the glass cabinet which houses the coffee machine and various other fancy items of refereshment. MacFadden gives me a faintly disapproving look as I attempt to locate a place at the table.

There’s a single empty chair at the foot of the table closest to the huge screen, but there’s still one executive not yet seated. He stands by the cabinet holding a coffee cup and saucer, saying something in a low murmur to the Pencil. She laughs. If I’m quick I can claim the seat while he’s busy flirting, then the over-primped lackey can deal with the humiliation of losing out in this game of corporate musical chairs.

Casually, I saunter down the right hand side of the table. The young exec is actually closer, about halfway down on the opposite side, but hasn’t yet cottoned on to the fact that his impeccably tailored arse is about to become homeless. MacFadden abruptly clears his throat causing the hubbub in the room to die. Realising that the meeting is about to begin, the exec winks at the Pencil, gazes around the room and finally clocks the empty seat. Too late, chum, that chair is mine. I’ve picked up my pace to a race walk; it’s going to be close but another couple of feet and I’m home and dry.

The seat ahead of me abruptly rolls back from the table on its castors, blocking my path; the occupant gets to his feet and I only just manage to avoid crashing into him. We end up standing so close that our faces are almost touching. He eyes me for a moment. It’s Skeletor-lookalike, Craig Springer. ‘You trying to snog me or something, mate?’ he demands in his nasal Antipodean twang.

‘No, sorry, I was…’ I gesture at the vacant chair next to him. Except of course, it’s no longer vacant.

A ripple of amusement travels the room.

‘All right, all right, settle down,’ Springer addresses the room. ‘And you, stop standing about like a spare prick at a wedding and park your arse.’

I take a step back, feeling my face beginning to burn. ‘There’s no more chairs,’ I point out.

Springer tuts like it’s my fault. ‘Someone get this tosser a chair for Christ’s sake. Then maybe we can get the meeting started.’

The Pencil plonks down the French press with a huff and clacks off, presumably to find me something to sit on.

I remain standing more or less in the centre of the boardroom, still uncomfortably close to Craig Springer while everyone waits. Springer looks at me suspiciously. ‘Who the bloody hell are you anyways?’

‘It’s Simon Collins, consultant on the business.’ I turn to see a stony-faced Tony seated a couple of chairs away from Doug MacFadden at the top of the table.

‘Ah, yeah, Collins,’ says Springer in a way that suggests that this is not a good thing. Fortunately, before he’s able to expand on my shortcomings to the entire world, the Pencil reappears pushing a badly squeaking chair. ‘The two rear castors are broken,’ she announces with a thin smile, ‘so I shouldn’t lean back if I were you.’ With that she clacks back over to the refreshments.

I take the wobbly chair and shove it into a gap between Mary Pinsley and Springer. As I gingerly lower my weight onto the seat I feel it immediately wanting to tip me backwards. I’m forced to lean forward and grip the edge of the table with both arms to stay balanced. It’s similar to something the SAS do to their prisoners; they call it the stress position.

‘If everyone’s quite comfortable?’ says Springer pointedly, gazing down at me.

My back and arms are already beginning to ache with the strain.

‘Right, listen up. Tony M’s, going to give us the weekly topline on the Val-Mall account. No biggies. Shouldn’t take more than half an hour. Over to you, Tony.’

Twenty agonizing minutes later Tony wraps up his presentation with a flourish of his flashy laser pointer. ‘So, there it is for another week. Let’s get back to work.’

My arms and back are killing me. Although I’ve been primarily focused on not being flipped backwards out of my chair, I’ve managed to follow most of what Tony had to say. A competely anodyne summary of the previous week’s activities with no mention of my findings at all.

‘Thanks all. Keep up the good work,’ grins Tony.

I ease my buttocks forward to the front edge of the seat preparatory to releasing the edge of the table. The team rises, gathers their business paraphernalia and heads for the door leaving MacFadden, Tony, Springer and Pinsley still seated.

I get to my feet just as Tony finishes whispering something urgent in MacFadden’s ear. He looks over at me and shakes his head. ‘Not you, Simon,’ he says.

I place my hands back on the boardroom table and slowly lower myself to what appears to be a sitting position but without actually putting any weight on the seat. I’ve managed to stay upright so far and don’t want to spoil it all now by pulling a Sweeny Todd. I settle into a kind of downhill ski racer’s posture, so that all my weight’s on my thighs.

The Pencil clatters over to top up MacFadden’s coffee but he demurs. ‘Leave it, Pip. And shut the door on your way out. Nobody’s to come in. Got it?’

I can see that the Pencil is silently furious. She looks me over in total disbelief, mouth like a cat’s arse, unable to comprehend why some shabbily dressed nobody in off-brand chinos and trainers is allowed to remain here with the senior team when she, with her bitter-lemon specs and hate couture, is being ejected.

Serves her fucking right for giving me a booby-trapped chair.

‘Right then,’ says MacFadden as the frosted glass door closes on the departing Pencil. He turns to me. ‘Collins isn’t it? You’re probably wondering why we’ve kept your stuff under wraps. For the moment, I want this situation kept strictly on a need to know basis. Don’t want to scare the horses and all that. Is that clear?’

‘It is.’

‘So, go on then, show us what you’ve got.’

Thank God. The winter sports position is surprisingly hard to maintain for any length of time and my legs have been vibrating with the effort for a good few minutes now. I reach for my briefcase and get to my feet before handing the bound report to MacFadden. I have the memory stick all ready for when Tony puts me on the spot but, to my surprise, he lets me off the hook. ‘Just the report. No need for a presentation, Simon.’

Skeletor, Tony and Prinsley gather round MacFadden as he turns the pages. I have no intention of putting myself through any further physical agony, so while they’re occupied I take the opportunity to wander over to the refreshments cabinet. There’s a large, flat bistro-style plate containing an assortment of green and orange items, which a tent card informs me are pea and salmon blinis. I take a couple and nibble them before pouring myself a strong cup of coffee. The blinis are not bad in a bland, slightly fishy way but canapés are not really what I’m after. The team are so completely absorbed in the report that I’m free to go to town on the precious biscuini. I lift the lid on the sleek, black enamel box and there, artfully arrayed in all their dazzling glory, nestled within tiny paper doilies, are the Pencil’s crown jewels. Provencal Limon crème? Salt water taffy and double choc shortbread? Don’t mind if I do, and to hell with the tongs. I grab a couple and shove them into my mouth. They’re every bit as good as they look.

I’m fully immersed in the delicate yet complex delights of a Sicilian pasticcini di mandorle when Tony’s insistent voice breaks the moment. ‘Simon…Simon.’

I’ve ravaged the beautifully arranged box, which is now a mass of paper doilies piled up like so many autumn leaves. I turn, trying not to look too guilty.

‘Ok, Simon, good work so far. You’ve isolated the effect, now we’d like you to identify the cause. We need to know why this is happening, asap,’ urges Tony.

‘Get to the root of the phenomenon,’ adds Pinsley.

‘Agreed, we need to know what’s actually causing it,’ says Skeletor, not wanting to be left out of the saying-the-same-thing-but-with-different-words contest.

‘I have no idea.’

 ‘I don’t care how you do it but we need answers fast,’ says MacFadden brandishing my report in his meaty fist.

Pinsley nods, ‘Perhaps I should put my team on it, they can…’

 MacFadden smacks the report on the edge of the table, cutting her off. ‘Absolutely not, Mary. I don’t want this getting out until we know how to fix it. The information does not leave this room.’

‘I suggest we go direct to the source,’ says Tony, ‘talk to the demongraphic. Find out why they’re not buying.’

‘Good, Tony.’ MacFadden smiles encouragingly.

Now that Tony’s shown the way, Skeletor and Pinsley pile in with variations on the theme. ‘Agreed. We should speak to the target.’

‘Absolutely. A bit of good old qualitative research.’

‘Get some verbatims.’

‘Excellent idea.’

While the team are all busy violently agreeing with themselves I slip my hand into the box again and riffle through the empty doilies. I’m pretty sure there are still a couple of raspberry cream macarons lurking in the bottom.

‘So, that’s the plan. We use Collins to research the demographic.’

‘Say what?’

‘We need you to go back to Newbury. Speak to some millennials.’

‘No. I don’t do…’

‘Yes, Simon, you do.’ Tony glares, his expression informing me that this is not open to debate in front of his boss.

‘And try to keep your pants on this time,’ advises Skeletor.

MacFadden is not at all amused. ‘Tony, he’s going to need to sign an NDA.’

‘Consider it done, Doug.’ Tony flicks his head towards the door, motioning me out.

I scuttle round the table to retrieve my briefcase, relieved to get away before the biscuini pillage is discovered.

As Tony leads me down the corridor, The Pencil motors past without giving us a second glance. Given that I’ve made him look reasonably competent in front of his boss, I decide to appeal to Tony’s better nature. ‘Tony,’ I say, when we arrive back at reception, ‘please don’t make me do this research stuff. I do data. You know I’m no good with people.’

‘You can’t expect concessions from me, Simon. I’m not at all happy with you. You cost me last night and don’t think I didn’t see you ravaging Pip’s biscuini. You bloody well make sure you get yourself to Newbury by tomorrow morning.’

What I keep forgetting of course, is that Tony doesn’t have a better nature.

Chpt

The ten a.m. fast train from Paddington is about twelve minutes out of Reading when Tony calls my mobile to check on my progress. ‘You there?’

 ‘Yes, I’m here,’ I reply, just to annoy him.

 ‘I mean are you in Newbury yet?’

 ‘About ten minutes away.’

 ‘Ok, here’s the plan. There’s a package waiting for you at the Val-Mall reception. It’s a hard copy of the V.M.VIP Club Card database. Customer ages, names, addresses, numbers and so on. Use it to work out who to speak to. Call them, make an appointment. Figure out what’s going on. Don’t come back until you know something. You’ll be staying at the Newbury View again. Got it?’

 ‘Got it.’

 Oh, and do not let anyone at the company know what you’re doing. Do not speak to anyone there, especially Diane Lister. We’re trying to keep this under wraps; in any case, she thinks you’re a monster.’

 ‘Charming.’

 ‘As does Pip. She’s very upset, Simon.’

 ‘Ok, so I pilfered a few of her biscuini.’

 ‘It’s not just that. It’s Craig Springer. He’s fractured his coccyx. Went arse over tit on one of the boardroom chairs. For some reason Pip’s blaming you. It happened after you’d left, so I’ve no idea why. You just seem to have a gift for rubbing people the wrong way.’

 I stifle a guffaw.

 ‘You find that amusing? Sounds like you’re finding that funny.’

‘No, not at all. I’m horrified. That was the sound of horror.’ I’ve been staring out the window at the fast moving Berkshire scenery, as I shift focus I see my own face reflected in the dusty glass. I’m grinning like a lunatic. I know it’s appalling, but that news has really cheered me up.

‘He can’t sit down without having to use a special pillow and he’s been advised not to take a shit for a week. Pip’s absolutely inconsolable.’

I’m shaking with silent laughter.

‘Simon…Simon?’

‘I’m here. Sorry, went through a tunnel.’

‘Don’t make me look bad and don’t screw this up. You’re already on thin ice after Sunday.’

‘Tony, I really don’t see how you’re holding me responsible for whatever you think went wrong. You should be having a go at the Chuckle Brothers. It’s not on me that you didn’t get your mana…’

‘Oh, I got the mana.’

‘So what are you moaning about?’

‘You cost me two hundred quid.’

‘Two hundred? It was six grand, Tony.’

‘Fuck that, no way I’m risking six grand on you. Anyway, who’s got six grand in cash lying around the house? No, the kid got five nicely cut bundles of newspaper topped and tailed with real twenties in case anyone looked in the bag. You were just bait, Simon. You were supposed to keep eyes on the bag and the bag was supposed to lead us to the kid.’

‘But you got the mana?’

‘I did but I didn’t get to the kid. I’d like to have had words with that little shit.’

‘I’m pretty sure you will, Tony.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘I told you, he’s capable of stuff. Bad stuff.’

‘Well lucky he doesn’t know who I am, otherwise I’d be quaking in my boots.’

‘Sorry, mate, we’re just pulling in. Gotta go.’ I end the call, having no wish to reveal that not only does Valentine know who Tony is, by now, he probably even knows what he had for breakfast.

I take a cab from the station and get it to wait while I check in to the awful Newbury View hotel, depositing my overnight bag in the room. Ten minutes later we arrive at the Val-Mall on the outskirts of town.

‘Oy, pissy pants, you’re back then?’ Heavenly’s echoing voice bellows at me through the megaphone as I step out of the cab.

 ‘Don’t worry about her, Simon. She’s in a grump,’ Alice’s similarly amplified voice cuts in.

 It’s just the pair of them in their spot outside the Val-Mall; there’s no sign of Bodger or Toby. ‘Well, it’s lovely to see you back, sweetheart.’ Alice’s megaphone reverbarates across the car park. It’s busy today and even though I’m refusing to acknowledge these high volume greetings, shoppers are beginning to give me curious looks.

 Though the two of them are only feet apart Heavenly turns her megaphone on Alice. ‘You’re embarrassing him, Alice. Leave him alone.’

 Alice blasts her back, carefully enunciating each word at an ear-splitting level. ‘I’m just saying hello, Heavenly. It’s good manners. Not that you would know anything about that.’

 ‘Shut up, Alice. You’re misusing the protest equipment.’ Heavenly has turned her megaphone up so high that it’s beginng to generate a high-pitched feedback whine.

I head straight for the entrance while they’re otherwise engaged in this bout of amplified bickering. The automatic doors slide smoothly open and then close behind me with a gentle whoosh, shutting off the cacophony outside. Now there is only the muted hum of air conditioning, piped muzaak and the beeping of tills.

 Lee Delaware mans the Services desk. He gazes at me doubtfully. ‘I’m not supposed to talk to you,’ he states flatly.

 ‘That’s fine. I’m just here to pick something up.’

Still eying me with suspicion he lowers his pompadoured head to the stalk microphone. ‘Mrs Pryce-Gunn to reception please. Mrs Pryce-Gunn.’

We stand in silence, eying one another. ‘You’re a wrong ‘un,’ he says eventually.

I’m trying to think of a witty come-back when a grinning Mrs Pryce-Gunn barrels into view accompanied by a burly security guard in a stab vest. ‘Here he is, Flash Gordon hisself.’ She stands, hands on hips, appraising me like an affectionate but slightly mad aunt. The guard takes position just behind her in the classic arms folded stance. ‘I never thought you had it in you to look at you. Turns out you had it in you all right, then you went and got it out. Gave old vinegar tits a nasty turn and no mistake.’

‘It was an accident, I can assure you.’

‘Well, it gave me a right laugh it did.’ She gestures at the impassive security man. ‘This is Dave. He’s here to make sure you don’t try anything…spoilsport. But it’s orders you see, from the top. Now if you wouldn’t mind dropping trou, so I can frisk you like…’

‘What?’

‘Only joshing, my lovely. Chance’d be a fine thing. Anyhow, we’re supposed to give you this.’ She passes over a thick buff A4 envelope. ‘And now Dave’s got to escort you out, worse luck.’

I pop the envelope into my briefcase. Dave nods and gestures at the doors.

‘Beware people, here’s a glimpse of your future,’ intones Heavenly, delivering a resounding megaphone commentary as Dave follows me out, sticking close, presumably to ensure that I don’t sprint back inside to wave my privates at the shoppers. ‘A perfect example of commercial terrorism, a greedy corporation throwing its weight around. Innocent members of the public rounded up by corporate bully-boys. Take a good look, folks: the ugly face of the Val-Mall.’

 ‘Cheers then,’ says Dave affably as we reach the end of the paved forecourt. ‘No hard feelings, mate. Probably best not come back too soon though.’

 Customers hurry past with their trolleys, frowning and tutting at me. Basically, Heavenly’s attention-seeking howling has made me look like a busted shoplifter. I scuttle over to her patch on pavement so I can at least make it seem like I’ve been ejected for being an honest protestor rather than a tea-leaf.

 ‘Have you seen the light then? Come to join us?’ she asks, putting down the megaphone and squinting up at me.

 ‘I don’t see an “us”, there’s just you from what I can see.’

 ‘Alice left. Lost her temper and went off in a sulk.’

 ‘Lost her hearing, more like.’

 Heavenly smiles and drops down onto her blanket where she settles herself, cross-legged. ‘We all have to make sacrifices, if we’re going to change things.’ She pats the space next to her. ‘Come on, park your arse.’

 I sit beside her, briefcase on my lap. ‘You don’t mind hanging out with the enemy?’

 Heavenly chuckles. ‘They just marched you out. You can’t be all bad.’

 I sigh. ‘It’s a long story. I’m not exactly flavor of the month here. Except with a mad old welsh lady, who I think might have been coming on to me.’

 ‘D’you need a pill? That sounds like an awful lot of excitement.’

 ‘I do as a matter of fact.’ I flip open my briefcase and pop a Lexotan. As I shift the buff envelope, the strange little note flutters out and drops to the blanket where Heavenly scoops it up.

 ‘A billet-doux, how exciting. From your mad welshie?’

 ‘I’ve no idea what it is. It was in the jeans Toby bought, tucked away in the ticket pocket.’

 ‘You’re kidding.’

I shrug.

She frowns at me. ‘You’re not desperate to know? It could be anything. A ransom note, a love letter, maybe a haiku.’

‘Haiku is Japanese. I’m pretty sure this is chinese. The jeans were made in China.’

‘Maybe it’s a famous Japanese poet who got kidnapped and taken to China.’

‘Keep it,’ I say. ‘Mount a rescue. Knock yourself out.’

‘Perhaps I will,’ she sniffs, carefully folding the note and depositing it in her canvas satchel. ‘You have no curiosity, did you know that?’

‘No, I didn’t know that.’

‘Shame. You hungry?’

‘No. Not really,’ I say, wrong-footed by her sudden change in direction.

‘Come and grab a bite with me.’ She leaps to her feet and bundles up the blanket, stuffing it into the canvas satchel. She ties the megaphone securely to the satchel straps, drapes it over her shoulder and grabs me by the hand.

Her grip is surprisingly strong and it takes an effort to pull away. ‘I can’t. I’ve got…stuff to do.’

‘What more can you possibly have to do? You’ve done enough. You’re like the Alexander of shit marketing: “when he saw the breadth of his half-trolley, he wept, for there were no more worlds to conquer.”’

‘Very funny. Anyhow, it’s about the depth of the thing.’

‘Deeply immoral is what it is.’

‘Well, you may not appreciate it but some of us have work to attend to,’ I announce, airily waving the buff envelope at her.

She snatches it from my hand and runs.

My briefcase is still wide open; I waste a moment fiddling with the catches before I can set off in pursuit. By the time I’m across the road and into the car park, Heavenly has disappeared.

Not only am I unable to do Tony’s interviews now but I’ve also lost a valuable database. Somehow I’m going to have to explain to Tony that I was wafting this highly sensitive proprietary document in the face of a rabid anti-Val-Mall protester, when she snatched it out of my hand and legged it – could have happened to anyone really. As an excuse it ranks even lower than “the dog ate it” or “spontaneous combustion”. I’m still considering the scale of the trouble I might be in when Heavenly reappears on a battered motor scooter. ‘Hop on,’ she shouts, brandishing an ancient pale orange helmet.

‘Where’s my bloody database?’ I yell over the crackling of her exhaust.

‘The envelope thingy? You can have it back if you come and eat.’

‘I’m busy.’

‘Ok then, see ya.’ She puts the scooter into gear.

‘Wait, wait,’ I hold up a hand. ‘You win. I need that envelope.’

‘So shove this on,’ she grins, handing me the helmet.

 I set down my briefcase and try on the helmet. It’s a few sizes too small and even after a good deal of tugging perches high on my head and clamps painfully about my ears. It’s not even possible to connect the straps.

 ‘You look like a gigantic baked bean,’ she announces as I straddle the seat behind her, one arm around my briefcase. She reaches round and places my free arm firmly around her waist. ‘Hang on tight,’ she bellows.

By the time we pull up outside a Chinese takeaway near the centre of town I can feel a headache coming on. Doubtless a combination of cranial pressure, the clattering of an unbaffled exhaust and fear. Heavenly rides likes she talks, aggressively and with no concern for the consequences.

 ‘We’re having chinese,’ she announces.

 ‘I did get that,’ I say, tugging at the helmet.

 ‘Leave it on, we’re not staying,’ she advises, pushing open the door.

 ‘Celestial One,’ grins the tiny, wizened lady behind the counter.

 ‘Mrs Lee, how are you today?’ replies Heavenly.

 ‘Same, same. Bones hurt. Like always.’

 Hev turns to me. ‘This is my friend, who is disguised as a baked bean. His name is Heinz,’ she cackles.

Mrs Lee considers me, then shrugs unimpressed, ‘You all look same to me. So, what you want?’

 ‘One General Tso’s chicken, sweet and sour prawns and a small rice I think.’

 ‘I bring.’

 ‘Oh, and I have something I’d like you to translate for me.’ Heavenly produces the little note from the pocket of her cargo pants.

Mrs Lee takes a quick look at it, sniffs and stuffs it into her housecoat. ‘Sure. I bring.’

‘Thanks, Mrs Lee. See you in a bit.’ She turns to me, ‘Not far now,’ she says and makes for the door.

I follow her out onto the street, agreeably surprised when she ignores the parked scooter, instead producing a key, which she inserts into the flaking green door next to the shop. ‘I could have taken the bloody thing off then,’ I say, finally managing to wrench the industrial vice off my head.

‘Yes, but then you’d have ruined my joke.’ I follow as Heavenly mounts a steep, narrow staircase to the first floor. Another key is swiftly inserted into the landing door and we enter.

‘Welcome to the Heavenly kingdom,’ she says, arms outstretched to encompass a smallish living room. The walls and ceilings are draped with intricately patterned fabrics, while the floor is covered with an assortment of rugs and oversized cushions. A couple of stained glass globes hang from the ceiling on fishing line. In the corner of the room is a desk and chair, home to a late model Mac Powerbook and printer.

‘Sit,’ she orders, indicating one of the giant cushions. ‘I’ll get something to drink. Herbal tea all right?’

‘Anything really.’

‘Licorice and fig, cherry and cinnamon, raspberry, hyacinth and vanilla or Oolong and peach?’

‘Fine, any of those will be fine.’

‘Oh wait, I think I’ve also got some cloudberry and buttercup, chive and rafflesia, ylang ylang and foxglove or banana and deadly nightshade?’

‘You’re making those up.’

‘Yeah, I’ve just got lemon zinger.’

‘Lemon zinger will be great. Can I have my envelope back please?’

‘Course you can.’ Heavenly rummages in her satchel and tosses me the buff envelope. ‘Won’t be a minute,’ she announces, before disappearing into the adjoining room. I examine the contents of the envelope to the sounds of mugs clattering and a kettle boiling. It’s just a print out of a list of names, ages, socioeconomic status, addresses, phone numbers and recent purchases but the bad news is that there are pages and pages of the stuff. I’ll be down here for weeks if I have to work my way through this lot. I lie back on the cushion and moan.

‘That bad?’ Heavenly reappears carrying a tray on which there are two mismatched steaming mugs and two empty bowls. She places the tray on the floor, settles on the cushion opposite before handing me one of the mugs.

‘Worse. I’ve got to work my way through this list. It’s going to take me forever and I hate talking to people.’

‘Why? People are great, on the whole. Apart from Alice sometimes’

‘I get very anxious around strangers, which is more or less everyone. It’s a medical condition, Social Anxiety Disorder. I go bright red if I think people are looking at me. I’m terrified of blushing because I think it’s going to make people look at me. It’s a vicious circle. It’s easier not to go out.’

‘I’m looking right at you. You’re not blushing now.’

‘You’re not a stranger. Well, not a complete stranger. In any case you’re not judging me.’

‘I am actually. I think you’re an idiot. I think that’s the most idiotic thing I’ve ever heard.’

‘It’s not like I want to be like this,’ I mutter, sipping my tea to mask my discomfort.

‘I think you do. I think it’s a convenient way to hide from life. Just laziness, Simon.’

‘No, Heavenly, I’m genuinely paralysed by other people and their opinions of me.’

‘What do other people’s opinions matter? You’re allowing yourself to be held back from everything in life by what you imagine other people might be thinking of you. That’s actually pathological, a form of narcissim.’

‘Quite the opposite, I’d have thought.’

‘No. You must imagine yourself to be the centre of the universe.’

‘I don’t. I think I’m pretty worthless.’

‘But you believe everyone is looking at you? Judging you?’

‘Yes.’

‘So, they have nothing better to do or think about but what a prat you are?’

‘That’s not quite…’

‘It’s narcissistic. Has it never occurred to you that people might have other things going on in their heads? That not everyone is thinking about Simon Collins?’

‘Of course. I know that.’

‘Maybe other people are worried about what the world thinks of them, including you. Everyone is a bundle of neuroses. Except for the psychopaths. And by the way, there are plenty of those about. Psychopaths will never think well of you no matter what you do, so their opinion doesn’t matter. You’re a little kid hiding under the blankets from the twin imaginary monsters in the cupboard - shame and humiliation. Wake the fuck up, get out from under the blanket, turn on the light, open the cupboard door and see what’s in there. It’s a full length mirror. Look at it, that’s what’s been holding you hostage all your life.’

‘A mirror?’

‘No, you, you dunce. It’s all in your imagination. Stop being so afraid. Fear does not stop death. It stops life. Be bold, Simon, and mighty forces will come to your aid.’

All this analysis of my anxiety is bringing on my anxiety. I pretend to examine the contents of my mug and wonder whether Heavenly will object if I drop another Lexotan. ‘It makes perfect sense when you say it. But I don’t know whether I can think about it like that.’

‘Ok then, just imagine them on the toilet.’

‘Who?’

‘Everyone.’

There’s a sharp rap on the landing door. Hev leaps to her feet leaving me to grapple with this particular slice of scatological pop psychology.

In a moment or two she returns carrying a small stack of three fragrant polystyrene boxes. ‘Lunch.’ She hands me a set of disposable chopsticks, which I separate while she spreads the boxes on the floor between us. I reach for one of the empty bowls and, although I’m actually ravenous, wait for her to dig in first. She already reckons I’m an idiotic baked bean-headed corporate shill with a made-up mental condition, I wouldn’t want her to think me a greedy bastard as well.

‘I told Mrs Lee you were a consultant.’ She fills her bowl with quick, precise movements. Deftly maneuvering the chopsticks, she inserts a prawn into her mouth and chews. ‘She got very excited. She thinks that means you’re a doctor.’

‘Oh,’ I say, shovelling a bit of everything into my own bowl.

‘Says I ought to marry you, quick.’

I drop a chopstick.

‘Don’t worry, I have no desire to be shoved up the aisle in a half-trolley having a bunch of Uncle Ben’s two-for-the-price-of-one boil-in-the-bag rice sachets slung at me.’

‘Well, I suppose that’s…’

‘Now you’re blushing.’

I am and I’m not entirely sure about how I feel about this. On the one hand I’m genuinely amazed, grateful even, to find myself in the company of something more substantial than a construct of pixels from the realm of Eringord. On the other, I’m realistic enough to understand that she will never see me as anything other than a vaguely amusing oddity.

‘Yum. You can never tire of chinese food. That reminds me,’ she says, digging into her pocket. ‘Mrs Lee gave me the translation.’ She unfolds the little note and smooths it out on the rug in front of her. ‘I expect she got Rosy to do it. That’s her daughter, speaks fluent Mandarin, Cantonese, Hokkien, Wuzhu, sweary English. You name it, she can speak it.’

Rosy has penned her translation in beautifully formed letters below the Mandarin characters. Hev slowly reads. ‘Dear White Ghost, my name is Precious Jade. Have you eaten? Last year I was taken from my village of Yangyitang. Now I live at the The Lucky Orchid garment factory in Shaxi, Zhongshan City, Guang Dong Province. We are working eighteen hours every day, seven days a week. I cannot leave. It is so hard. Who are you? Do you ever think of me? I have many questions for you. We are so far away and yet, so close, connected by a pair of pants. I wish you would come to rescue me, White Ghost.’

‘Well, it’s definitely not a love note,’ I say.

Hev’s eyes are huge. ‘Fuck,’ she says slowly and emphatically. ‘This is why we’ve been demonstrating.’

‘How could you know? You’ve only just read it.’

‘We know this kind of thing’s been going on for a while now and worse. You have no idea of the scale of the problem.’

‘And you do?’

‘Of course I do. I’m part of Extermination Revolution. Visit the website. This whole thing is a fucktangular interconnected matrix of iniquity; a vicious circle in which these terrible factories effectively enslave workers like Precious Jade in the most squalid conditions, churning out junk to satisfy the the West’s demand for cheap goods. Low priced garbage which is then flogged by the megastores, which squat on the outskirts of our towns, killing our high streets and hollowing out our communities. The entire enterprise is powered by millions of tons of fossil fuels which are polluting the environment, warming the planet and turning the air into a toxic soup. All to make a handful of super-rich predators ever richer. And that’s why I told you not to buy jeans from that place.’

‘I didn’t buy them, Toby did. And anyway they didn’t fit.’

‘Oh, well that’s all right then.’

‘No, it’s not all right but I’m not sure it’s fair to blame the state of the world on one pair of jeans. Or me for that matter.’

‘Thin end of the wedge and all that. Your jeans are destroying lives and fouling the planet.’ She emphasizes the words with her chopsticks.

‘Ok,’ I sigh, ‘so maybe they could use a wash.’

There’s a silence while Heavenly processes this remark. ‘That’s not funny.’ She smiles though, revealing those sharp pixie teeth of hers. ‘I know, I get a bit carried away. But it matters.’

‘So what about that scooter of yours then?’

‘None of us are perfect,’ she replies, blithely tweezing another prawn. ‘Can I keep the note?’

‘Of course. What are you planning to do with it?’

‘Send it to Extermination Revolution. The more of this kind of hard evidence we can put out there the more support we get. Plenty of people are already beginning to wise up.’

‘Put it out where?’

‘Through the website, social media and so on.’ She waves the note at me. ‘This little scrap of paper is explosive, another nail in the coffin for the Val-Mall and their like; it’ll be viral by teatime. Imagine that, Simon, you’ve just become an activist eco warrior, apex level.’

‘No, absolutely not. Leave me out of this.’

‘You’ll be carried shoulder high through London on the next disruption march.’

‘Why would I want that?’

‘Saves having to walk.’ Heavenly gets to her feet and wanders over to the computer desk. She sits and opens up the laptop.

‘Do you really think what you’re doing makes any difference?’

‘Of course I do. Extermination Revolution has over seven hundred thousand followers on Instragram alone. Around half a million on Facebook and Twitter. That’s a lot of influence.’

‘Fine, but what can they really do apart from disrupt traffic and annoy commuters?’

‘Vote with their wallets for a start.’

I surreptitiously finish off General Tso’s chicken while Heavenly pops the note onto her printer and sets up the scanning function. ‘We’re boycotting mass produced goods sourced from China. If only half of us are actively engaged that’s three-hundred and fifty thousand consumers saying no to your jeans. The power of the consumer, Simon. You of all people should understand that.’

‘Wait, what?’

‘Consumer power.’

‘The boycott, how does it work?’

‘Social media of course. Where’ve you been for the last three months? Even you must have seen something?’

‘Not really. I sometimes go on Facebook but all my friends are involved with the Craft.’

‘That figures, you’re sealed off in your own nerdlinger echo chamber. You need to expand your network a bit.’

‘I have no wish to be friends with a bunch of extremist right-ons.’

‘Seven hundred thousand young people is not extremist, Simon. It’s mainstream. People are becoming aware of what’s going on and they’re saying bollocks, we’re not having it. Take a look.’

I make my way over to Heavenly’s desk where she has Extermination Revolution’s Instagram page open on the laptop. There are the usual photos of young people in wool holding up cardboard signs, the squared-up images are punctuated by simple brightly coloured graphics urging supporters to take a variety of urgent actions. Amongst them is a stylised image of a red factory with a diagonal line through it exhorting supporters to boycott Chinese-made goods.

‘If you go to the website you can read a list of demands addressed to the Chinese government covering human rights, censorship and the environment. Until they respond we’re boycotting their consumer goods. It might be just a pinprick right now but we’re starting to get a bit of traction in Europe and the States.’ She shuts down the Instragram page, revealing the scanned image of my little note on her desktop. She opens her email and begins to type.

I wander back to the cushion, flop down and stuff the buff envelope back into my briefcase.

Case closed. Literally.

As though on cue, my mobile rings. Naturally it’s Tony. ‘Simon, what the fuck?’ It’s the hysterical puppet voice so whatever this is can’t be good.

‘I don’t know, Tony. What the fuck what?’

‘Why is there a picture of me getting bummed by a California Highway patrolman on every bloody screen at MacFadden Springer?’

‘I don’t know, Tony, is there something you’d like to tell me?’

‘The entire network’s completely useless; we can’t access our data, send emails, open files, we can’t do anything. Even the company website has crashed. What the hell is going on?’

‘Sounds like you’ve been hacked.’

‘Yes, I’m well aware of that. What do you know about it?’

‘Why would I know anything about it?’

‘It’s the work of your little extortionist friend. There’s a red heart at the bottom of the picture, like a bloody signature.’ Amazingly Tony’s voice rises a half tone. ‘It’s animated and it’s got sound,’ he squeals.

‘Well I did warn you.’

‘The IT people are completely clueless and the clients are going mental. I need you to get hold of your mate and get it sorted, ASAP.’

‘Why do you think I can do anything? You shouldn’t have ripped him off, Tony.’

Tony’s voice drops to a wheedling tone. ‘He knows you. Come on, mate. You can come back to London. I’ll get someone else to do the interviews.’

‘No need. I’ve found out what’s causing the problem.’

‘See, that’s the thing, Simon. You may be a bit flaky but I can always rely on you to get the job done. That’s why we make such a great team. What d’you say?’

I’m inclined to make the bastard sweat a bit but, while he deserves whatever indignity Patrolman Chips is inflicting, I do actually feel a teeny bit sorry for him. Besides, if MacFadden realizes that this mess is essentially of Tony’s making he’ll likely lose his job, taking mine along with it. ‘OK, Tony. What can I give him?’

Tony sighs, ‘Tell him he can have the six grand. No questions.’

‘Try again.’

‘Cash.’

‘Definitely cash. But six grand probably won’t cut it.’

‘Whose side are you on here, Simon?’

‘If you think you can do better, be my guest.’

‘MacFadden’s champing at the bit to get the law involved.’

‘That’s only going to make things worse. Just pay up, Tony. I assume it’ll be company money anyway.’

There’s a pause on the end of the line while Tony weighs up the options. In truth, there is only one smart move. I wait for him to get there, conscious of the fact that Heavenly has been earwigging the entire time, eyebrows raised, mouth wide open in an expression of exaggerated amazement.

‘OK, so what’s it going to take?’

‘Ten maybe. Cash.’

‘Jesus, ten grand. I’d love to get my hands on that little fucker.’

‘Leave well alone, Tony. He dangerous, so no messing about this time.’

‘Fine. Get it done, Simon. Use the corporate credit card to get the the cash; I’ll sign it off. Train fare, cab expenses whatever it takes. But I want it sorted today though. Clear?’

‘I’ll do my best.’

‘So what about this China business?’

‘Can’t talk now. I’ll have to get back to you.’

‘Today, Simon.’ As usual he cuts the connection abruptly.

Heavenly leaps to her feet, her face luminous. ‘Oh my God, is that blackmail?’

I give what I imagine to be an insouciant shrug. ‘Can’t discuss it.’

‘No way. That was the coolest thing I’ve ever heard.’ She looks at me with glee. ‘You were talking about blackmail.’

‘I can’t really…’

‘Sounded very like it to me.’

‘It is but…’ Her eyes are shining and I find I’m enjoying the attention for a change. I pause, hoping to appear modestly reluctant before sighing. ‘It’s nothing really, the company I work for just has a little problem with a hacker. He goes by an alias: Valentine. He’s attacked their systems and is holding them to ransom. They’ve asked me to deal with it.’

‘How exciting. Perhaps there’s more to you than meets the eye.’

I’m not sure whether to be pleased or offended by this. ‘No big deal,’ I say.

‘I heard you mention the hacker was dangerous.’

‘Very.’ I reply, neglecting to point out that he’s basically just a schoolboy with computer skills. ‘Can I use your laptop?’

‘I don’t want my stuff hacked, Simon.’

‘There’s no chance of that. I just need to send a quick message.’

Heavenly nods and I sit myself at her desk. I open up the browser and there’s a ping indicating a message waiting in her inbox. It’s a response from Extermination Revolution.

I go straight to the Hackysac site and begin typing: “Dear Valentine, Majeski received your message, loud and clear. Ready to negotiate.” I sign it, Gorminhex, and post. Then I reconsider. Valentine’s not a big Craft player so he might not know who Gorminhex is. I don’t want to scare him off so I add another post underneath reading: “thief-assassin” in brackets. Then I decide he probably doesn’t even know who or what a thief-assassin is. He might take it as a threat, so, just to be sure, I add another post reading: “the one in the hood”, also in brackets. I’m about to add a further post in brackets reading: “the one you met at ComicCon”, when my phone rings. I know it’s Tony. Who else would it be? I’ve left the phone over on the cushion so Heavenly picks it up for me and answers. ‘Tell him I’m busy,’ I announce, as I finish off my post.

‘He’s busy,’ repeats Heavenly. ‘I’m Heavenly,’ she explains. There’s a pause. ‘No, just a friend.’ She laughs. ‘Yeah, he’s on the computer. I dunno what he’s doing now. He said to call back later.’ She laughs again. ‘He says you’re very dangerous. You don’t sound dangerous.’

Either Tony is managing to turn on some hitherto hidden reserve of charm or it’s a wrong number. She turns to me still holding the phone to her ear. ‘Valentine says: “get off the fucking internet and talk to me, you complete and utter melt.”’

I scuttle over and grab the phone. ‘Valentine?’

‘She sounds nice. Girlfriend, is she? She says not. Shame.’

‘That’s none of your business. How did you get this number?’

‘I’ve got the numbers of anyone remotely connected with MacFadden Springer and a lot more besides. It wasn’t difficult to figure out who you were, Simon Collins. Took your bloody time though, I launched a DDoS attack on the website first thing this morning and took down the internal systems with a Trojan horse a couple of hours ago. I been waiting for you to respond for the last hour. And what’s with all that “Gorminhex in the hood” stuff you’re posting? You trying to be gangster?’

‘I wanted you to be sure it was me. And I only just heard about it.’

‘From Majeski, yeah? How’s he liking my work?’

‘He isn’t.’

‘He’s not meant to. I used his official company headshot. Nice touch, I thought.’

‘All right, let’s cut to the chase. I assume the price has gone up.’

‘Well done, mate.’

‘Cash I suppose.’

‘Well done again, fifty housepoints to Gryffindor.’

‘How’s seven?’

‘Not even close.’

‘Eight?’

‘I’ve had to go to a lot of trouble here, Simon. Spidering, social engineering, bit of phishing, not to mention having my delivery boys messed around and chased.’

‘Sod it then. Tony says he’ll go up to ten.’

There’s a momentary silence on the line, while Valentine considers this. ‘Yeah, go on then. I’ll take ten, cash.’

‘Done.’

‘But it’s gotta be you, mate. I trust you. I don’t trust them corporate wankers.’

‘Well, thanks, I suppose.’

‘Don’t get carried away, I only trust you ‘cos you’re a moron.’

‘Fine,’ I sigh, ‘How’s it going to work? Speak slowly because I’m a moron.’

‘I’ll come to you.’

‘I’m away at the moment.’

‘I know. You’re in Newbury. Cheap Street, am I right?’

I put my thumb over the mouthpiece of the phone, ‘Where are we?’ I hiss at Heavenly.

‘Cheap Street. 27B.’

‘Shit,’ I say, removing my thumb, ‘how the hell did you do that?’

‘Child’s play, mate. It’s not even a hack, just a simple geopositioning query. I’ll be there in two hours, what’s the house number?’

‘27B, above the Chinese takeaway,’ I say. Nice to know he doesn’t know everything.

**Chpt**

‘Good bit of kit,’ announces Valentine, inspecting the laptop in the corner, ‘MacBook Pro, sixteen inch, SSD. I’ve got a Mac but I prefer a PC for my work. Alienware AW1. Can’t beat ‘em for poke.’

 ‘Cup of tea?’ offers Heavenly.

 ‘Lovely, I could murder a cuppa. Milk, three sugars…please.’

 ‘I’ve only got Lemon Zinger, I’m afraid. And I don’t use sugar.’

 ‘I don’t know what that is, but I’ll have a cup, if it’s not too much trouble,’ Valentine smiles nervously, revealing his stained teeth. ‘Besides, I’m sweet enough as it is.’

He’s carrying a small backpack, wearing the same tight black jeans but a different black T-shirt with a green wire-frame image of the globe and the words “Hack the Planet” across the chest. He’s still sporting the jet-black Hoxton fin but someone appears to have replaced the cocky smartarse with a shy and surprisingly polite sixteen-year old. ‘Sorry to be a nuisance but any chance of a bit of honey in that tea?’

‘Good idea,’ says Heavenly. ‘I’ll have some too. Simon?’

‘Please.’

‘Nice gaff,’ announces Valentine.

‘I’ll leave you to it,’ Heavenly smiles and heads for the kitchen.

Valentine grins at me. ‘She’s nice,’ he whispers. ‘Good for you, mate.’

‘It’s not what you think.’

‘Fair enough, but like I said, you’re a moron.’

‘Fine, I’m a moron but that’s why you trust me. Let’s get this over with. What’s supposed to happen now?’

‘You give me the cash, I make the problem disappear, what d’ya think?’

I reach for my briefcase and open it to reveal the two hundred brand new fifty-pound notes, which I took from the ATM an hour ago. I don’t mention the terrifying ordeal I endured returning from Market Place on the back of the scooter, unsure whether to apply the death-grip tighter around Heavenly or the briefcase.

Valentine bundles the loose notes into his backpack. ‘Pleasure doing business with you,’ he announces, extending his hand. I have no idea of the correct etiquette in these circumstances, so I shake it before lowering myself to one the outsized cushions. Valentine does likewise, tucking his skinny legs to one side, taking care to keep his trainers well clear of the fabric.

Heavenly reappears with three mugs on a tray. Each of us takes one and, just as Heavenly settles herself onto a cushion, Alice’s head appears round the sitting room door. ‘I let myself in, Hev. Sorry, didn’t know you had company.’

‘Come on in, Alice. I’ve just made tea.’

Valentine leaps to his his feet like a scalded cat.

‘Alice, this is Valentine. Simon, you already know,’ announces Heavenly.

 ‘I’ll get you a seat,’ offers Valentine, striding over to the computer desk. He grabs the chair and places it next to our cushions.

‘Well he can come again,’ announces Alice, settling herself. ‘What a gentleman.’

Valentine gives me a smug grin.

‘Brought you some cake,’ announces Alice, delving into her plastic bag.

‘Is that by way of an apology?’ asks Heavenly.

‘No, it’s by way of you never having any. I brought you some proper tea bags too. And some sugar. Since you never have any of those either.’

‘What’s the cake?’ Heavenly reaches for the bag.

‘Victoria Sponge. Store bought. Didn’t think you deserved a home-made after this morning.’

‘I’ll make you a cup,’ says Heavenly, ‘with your old people’s tea bags. Milk and two Strychnine all right for you?’

‘That’ll do just fine.’

‘Would you rather a cup of Tetley’s then?’ she asks Valentine.

 ‘Yeah, if it’s not too much trouble. This stuff’s a bit...’ he grimaces at his mug.

‘Three sugars?’

‘Lovely job.’

Alice smoothes her tweed skirt and addresses Valentine. ‘You joining us then, young man?’

‘Yeah, I’m always up for a bit of cake.’

‘Joining our little group. We do a bit of protesting against the Val-Mall for putting us local companies out of business and such.’

‘No, Alice,’ yells Heavenly from the kitchen, ‘we’re protesting against the evils of conglomerate corporations and the corrosive drive for profit at any price. It’s not just about you.’

 ‘Well, anyway, we’re a protest group.’ Alice looks at Valentine expectantly.

‘Nah, I think I’ll just stick with the cake.’

Heavenly’s voice cuts through for a second time, ‘We’re Hevvy Opposition, with a double V, check out our website,’

‘I might just do that,’ he replies.

‘So, what’s your story then?’

‘I’m a mate of Simon’s,’ he replies, eyeing me dangerously. ‘I work in IT.’

 ‘You don’t look old enough to be at work.’

Valentine shrugs. ‘I’m an entrepreneur. Got me own business.’

‘Like me then,’ says Alice.

Heavenly reappears with the cake on a tray and a mug of Tetley’s each for Alice and Valentine. ‘Valentine seems to understand how to make money,’ says Heavenly, ‘so, no, not like you at all, Alice.’

Alice huffs and reaches for a slice of cake.

‘My nan used to make a bangin’ Victoria sponge,’ says Valentine quietly.

‘You close to your nan then?’

‘Nah, she died.’

Heavenly reaches across and pats his hand; Valentine gives her a shy, lopsided smile. It’s an oddly intimate moment and entirely unexpected.

Heavenly shoots me a look before handing Valentine a plate. ‘Best make sure you get a nice big piece then,’ she says, cutting a large wedge for him.

We sip our tea in silence while Valentine wolfs his cake, chewing noisily, the plate balanced precariously on his lap. He eats quickly using both hands, heedless of the crumbs raining down on his cushion.

We watch in stunned silence. Valentine finishes the slice, licks his finger and uses it to scoop the remaining crumbs from his plate. He looks up warily, suddenly conscious of the attention.

‘Somebody was hungry,’ says Alice to break the silence.

‘Shit, sorry. Forgot me manners there.’

‘Don’t you worry,’ says Alice, ‘we don’t stand on ceremony here. Give him another piece, Hev.’

‘Nah, thanks, I should be heading back to London before the traffic gets too bad.’ Valentine necks the remainder of his Tetley’s and produces a mobile phone.

‘How are you getting there?’ asks Heavenly.

‘Same way I came, by cab,’ he says, dexterously thumbing the screen.

‘All the way to London? In a cab?’

‘He can afford it,’ I say, eliciting a sly grin from Valentine as he picks up the backpack.

‘It’s been a pleasure, ladies.’ Valentine treats Heavenly and Alice to an ungainly cross between a lurch and a bow. ‘You gonna walk me out, Simon? Be a shame if I got mugged.’

‘Escort you off the premesis more like,’ I say. ‘Better count the spoons, somebody.’ Nobody laughs.

I follow Valentine down the narrow stairs. As we reach the pavement he suddenly turns and delves into the backpack producing a thick handful of notes, which he thrusts at me. ‘Here,’ he says, ‘that’s for the cake.’

‘Don’t be stupid, there must be a grand there.’

‘Nah, more like five hundred. Take it, it’s yours. Share it with Alice and take your girlfriend somewhere nice.’

‘She’s not my girlfriend, Valentine.’

‘Like I said, you’re a moron.’

‘Why?’

‘She’s kind.’

‘I meant why the money?’

Valentine shrugs, ‘You did your bit.’

‘I can’t. It’s very nice of you but I really can’t take it.’

‘You really are an idiot,’ he says, stuffing the cash back into his backpack. He considers me for a long moment. ‘Give me a lever long enough and a fulcrum on which to place it and I shall move the world.’

I laugh. ‘Gorminhex,’ I say, ‘the creed of the thief-assassin’s guild.’

‘Yeah,’ he chuckles, ‘The Craft thing. Not entirely bollocks.’

‘It’s not. There’s some real wisdom in it. But what’s your point?’

‘Ask your girlfriend. Even the old lady. They get it, Simon.’

‘I’m not with you.’

At that moment a cab pulls up next to us. Valentine climbs in the back and winds down the window. ‘There’s always a lever, Simon.’

I can’t tell whether or not this is meant to be some kind of a threat and have no idea how to respond. ‘Don’t spend it all at once,’ is all I can think to say as the cab pulls away. As the final, snappy one-liner in a ransom drama goes, it could definitely use some work.

‘Dangerous, Simon?’

 ‘Yes, he’s dangerous.’

 ‘Only to cake.’

 ‘You have no idea what he can do.’

 ‘He can’t be more than sixteen.’

 ‘He was very sweet,’ chimes in Alice. ‘Who falls over themselves to fetch you a chair these days?’

‘A waiter.’

 Alice makes a face.

 I finish my tea, which has gone cold, somewhat disgruntled. My persona as the suave and fearless ransom negotiator has been well and truly shattered while Valentine, blackmailer and extortionist, is coming across as the bloody schoolboy pope.

 ‘I felt a bit sorry for him,’ says Heavenly. ‘He seemed lost.’

 ‘No chance. He uses a geo-location query thingy.’

 ‘I think he misses his nan.’

 ‘Well, I thought he was a very charming young man, running his own business at his age. Must be ever so good with money,’ announces Alice.

 ‘Not really. He…’ I was about to tell them that he offered us five hundred quid for his cake but I get the feeling that the fact that I turned it down might not play well with this audience.

 Alice hauls herself to her feet, ‘I best be off, love. Same time tomorrow at the Val-Mall?’

 ‘That reminds me. Simon found the most amazing note in his jeans. It came from a worker in China, so I sent it to E.R. Shall we see what kind of response it got?’

 ‘How exciting,’ says Alice as the two of them scuttle over to Heavenly’s laptop.

 There’s a slight pause. ‘Crikey, Alice,’ she announces with a grin. ‘It’s all over the internet. We’re famous. Hevvy Opposition’s famous.’

Chapt

‘Club sandwich for one. Norman No-mates, is it, sir?’ says Eric Lush delivering my room service order.

 ‘Just leave it there, thank you.’ Judging by the unappetizing sliver of processed cheese, semi-transparent wisp of ham and floppy lettuce leaf between curling white toast, I can only assume the club in question is Weight Watchers.

 ‘Young, thrusting go-getter like you should be out on the town, not moping in his room of a Thursday evening.’

 ‘I have work to do.’

 ‘You don’t have to tell me that. Ex copper, me. I pick up on the little clues. It’s a game I play with all my guests.’ He taps his temple. ‘Laptop, briefcase, overnight bag, it all adds up. Young, thrusting go-getter. Here on business I expect.’

 ‘Yes, on business.’

 ‘See?’ he taps his head again as though he’s just pulled off an impossible mind-reading feat.

 I had thought to head straight back to London but I’d left my bag here and as I’d already checked in this morning, the hotel was going to charge for the night anyway. Besides, when Heavenly dropped me off she made me promise to look in on the protest tomorrow. So here I am, in the dismal Newbury View hotel tonight while Eric Lush, ex-copper and general busybody examines my possessions for evidence of my thrusting and go-getting. I’d happily pay another ten grand for him sod off but the contents of my washbag are half unpacked on the dresser, catnip to Eric Lush. He examines my toothbrush. ‘Wisdom, medium bristle. Good choice, sir.’

‘Excuse me,’ I object.

‘Oh dear,’ he says, brandishing my Oral B mouthwash. ‘Two possibilities. Poor oral hygiene and gum disease, or bad breath. Now the toothbrush looks like it’s had a bit of use, so we’ll plump for the second. Halitosis? Am I right?’

‘No, you’re not right. Can you…’

‘Talc. Often indicates anxiety. Sweaty crack much?’

‘Can I just sign for the…’

‘Mousse, eh? Not a gel or a wax man, but mousse. Likes to make a good impression but nothing too flamboyant. Fancies himself as a bit of a player. Take my advice, get yourself down to Slappers at the Kennet Centre. Slippers actually, but I like to call it Slappers. Tell them Eric at the Newbury View sent you. We get a wee bit of commish out of it. No harm, no foul. Great music, loads of totty. A quick shower, a gargle for the breath, mousse up and you’ll be beating them off with a shitty stick.’

‘I have a lot to do,’ I insist, scrawling my signature across the room service chit.

‘That’s because you’re a young, thrusting go-getter. Clocked it, the second I walked in.’

Oddly, I’ve been mostly calm all day despite tearing around town on the back of Heavenley’s scooter and of course, negotiating with a blackmailer. Two minutes in the company of Detective Inspector Lush and I can feel a major anxiety attack coming on.

‘You all right, sir?’

‘No, I’m hyperventilating.’

‘Anxiety. There you go, I’m never wrong.’ Mercifully, he retrieves the signed chit and makes to leave. ‘You need to try and relax a bit, sir,’ he advises, before closing the door behind him.

I open my briefcase and with a slightly shaky hand pop out a Lexotan, which I swallow. My breathing is fast and shallow, perspiration beginning to form on my upper lip. A cold, fat bead of sweat runs down the small of my back ending up between my bum cheeks. I reach for the talc.

Now that my breathing has evened out I consider the prospect of the unappealing sandwich and kick myself for declining Heavenly’s invitation to stay for supper; I lied and claimed I had work to do. Valentine’s right, I’m a moron, but in my defence it’s a knee-jerk reaction. My knees jerk up and down very quickly. Also known as running. I can’t help it, running away from people is what I do. Sitting in this miserable room I realize I’d much rather be back at Cheap Street, having a quinoa and lentil quiche or whatever. It doesn’t take Simund Freud to realize that I’m sabotaging my own life.

 I examine myself in the dressing table mirror. A thin, angular, slightly startled-looking face stares back at me from bright blue eyes. I’m not what you’d describe as handsome but I don’t have bad breath and I’ve got pretty good hair. Thick brown hair that tends to flop but can be brushed back from the forehead and persuaded to behave itself with a little mousse. Annoyingly, Lush of the Yard got that one right. Nothing too flamboyant, thank you.

 Slowly I edge my face closer to the mirror and yell, ‘Oy, just fuck off holding me back will you?’ It’s so loud I actually startle myself.

 I feel quite liberated after that bout of auto-therapy and celebrate with a Coke and a miniature brandy from the mini-bar. There’s an Ethernet cable so I settle myself at the little desk, open my laptop, plug in and check emails. There is only one, an automated email from MacFadden Springer sent half an hour ago, no doubt to all staff and clients. It reads: *As you may be aware MacFadden Springer has experienced an outage in our internet and email services today owing to a technical issue beyond our control. The matter has now been resolved and we apologise to our staff and valuable clients for any inconvenience this may have caused*.

 It looks like Valentine came through. I imagine Tony has taken full credit and is even now receiving a standing ovation from the management team – well, from Craig Springer at any rate.

 I don’t often do social media but I’m curious to see how much impact the note has had since this afternoon. My own page has a few new postings and comments but only inconsequential babble related to the Craft. PringleStacks is looking for a costume recommendation: “Felicitations and salutations. Be there a fellow denizen of Eringord with knowledge of where I might purchase a pair of authentic leathern arm braces? Not too expensive?” Guildsman888 wants to know where to find the Unlocking charm in the Maze of Orubus. Pervis, typically, wants to know why the She-Orc of Endnight Forest has seven tits. This has promted a long discussion, with increasingly unlikely and deranged explanations from other players. It’s all very insular and, though I hate to admit it, a little bit childish. There’s nothing here about the state of the world, the real world that is.

 I don’t know her surname but there can’t be many Heavenlys out there. I type it in to the People Search box and a few profiles pop up. It turns out that Heavenly Penelope Orchid Nirvana’s surname is pretty normal. It’s Holmes. I open her page. Not surprisingly, her newsfeed is full of chatter and buzz about the note. I click on one of her connections, a twenty-something female. Likewise, her newsfeed is full of commentary and outrage. I continue clicking on random friends of friends, slowly enlarging the degrees of separation, exploring the outer limits of this vast pool of interpersonal connections. Throughout the pages are numerous personal pledges to boycott Chinese-made goods, many accompanied by Extermination Revolution’s red factory graphic. In most cases these pledges are supported by hundreds of likes. To be fair, there’s also the occasional photo of someone’s lunch or a cat with a moustache. Heavenly’s right though, the majority are not, on the whole, extremists and agitators but perfectly normal young people living reasonably productive lives.

 There are two things to be concluded from all this. Firstly, the Val-Mall is seriously going to have to rethink that upcoming deal with China. And secondly, I need to do something about my social network.

 I’m on the verge of unfriending my Facebook contacts, all fourteen of them, when the mobile rings. It’s Tony, but for once, I’m ok with the prospect.

 ‘Simon, we’re back online. Thank God.’

 ‘You could thank me instead.’

 ‘What did it set us back?’

 ‘Ten.’

 ‘Ouch.’

 ‘What do you care, it’s not your money?’

 ‘Well we’re upgrading our security and changing all the passwords as we speak. I’d still love to get my hands on that little toe-rag though.’

 ‘Let it go, Tony. He’s almost certainly left himself a backdoor in your systems.’

 ‘What does that mean?’

 ‘Most likely he can shut you down again, any time.’

 ‘Christ.’

 ‘So, just leave him well alone and thank your lucky stars there was no real damage done.’

 ‘We missed a bunch of deadlines. MacFadden’s had to spend most of the day on his hands and knees, arse-licking the clients. Springer too, and he finds it difficult to bend down.’

 ‘You’ll survive.’

 ‘So, you ready to talk to me about China?’

 ‘You’ve heard of Extermination Revolution, right?’

 ‘Who hasn’t? I’ve been late for work twice in the last six months because of those cretins prancing around in their pants.’

 ‘You’re thinking of the No Pants Day people.’

 ‘The ones who lie down in the road and stand on top of the trains, stopping people getting to work?’

 ‘Yeah, that’s Extermination Revolution. To cut a long story short they’ve made a bunch of demands of the Chinese government and, until those demands are met, they’re urging their followers to boycott goods from China.’

 ‘That’s it? A bunch of tree-huggers?’

 ‘They have around seven-hundred thousand followers on social media. Whatever you may think of them this boycott seems to be gaining traction amongst the eighteen to thirty-year old demographic.’

 ‘You’ve spoken to people about this and you’re convinced?’

 ‘I have and I am. Take a look on social media.’

 ‘Simon, my friends are all in their thirties and work in the city or media. No one gives a fuck about trees. The only climate we worry about is the economic climate.’

 ‘I take it you’ve got twenty-year olds at the office?’

 ‘Course we have. Interns and Account Execs and so on.’

 ‘Ask them.’

 ‘I will. When are you back?’

 ‘Tomorrow.’

 ‘I’ll need a report by four. Hard copy only.’

I ate the bacon and scrambled eggs, which weren’t too bad but I’ve left the sausage and the grilled tomato. This may well be conclusive evidence of me being a bog-breathed thruster or some kind of a serial killer; I don’t want to know, which is why my mission is to get out of the room before Eric Lush comes to collect the breakfast tray.

 I’m on the company credit card so I don’t have to worry about paying the bill or being overcharged for the mini bar Toblerone. Thankfully, reception is deserted so I drop my room key off in the slot provided. I hail one of the cabs waiting at the entrance and I’m free and clear.

Morning traffic is relatively clear in town and the driver is more interested in listening to Ken Bruce on Radio Two than giving me earache. Within ten minutes we pull into the Val-Mall carpark. I ask him to wait and step out.

 The protest is at its usual place at the edge of the forecourt, but today I count eleven people. There’s Alice, Toby, Bodger, who I’m not including, and Heavenly, along with eight others holding placards, mostly young and mostly grungy-looking. It very nearly resembles a proper demonstration. I wave at Alice and Toby as Heavenly blasts me with her megaphone: ‘Isn’t this great, Simon?’

 She hands the megaphone to Toby and comes running over. To my amazement she throws her arms round me and gives me a tight squeeze. ‘Look at all these people,’ she squeals. ‘This is your doing, Simon.’

 I’m not entirely sure what I should do with my hands so I pat her gently on the back. ‘Please don’t say that too loud, Heavenly. I’m already quite unpopular with the management here.’

 She pulls away and grins up at me. ‘It was your note that did it. Everyone’s talking about it. Some of these people have come all the way from Reading to support us.’

 ‘I’m very pleased for you.’

 ‘And guess what? P and B want to speak to us.’

 ‘I don’t know what that is.’

 ‘Paul and Ben. Founders of Extermination Revolution. They think the note could be a really big deal but they want to be sure it’s genuine. They’ve asked me to come up to London and I want you to be there with me.’

 ‘I can’t be involved, I’ve told you that.’

 ‘You are involved. You found the note and besides, this is a global issue so everybody’s involved. Come on, it’ll be fun. We’ll go on the London Eye afterwards.’

‘Seriously, I…’ Then I remember how I felt last night and I’m certain I don’t want to feel like that any more. ‘You know what?’

‘What?’

‘I looked in the mirror last night and told myself to fuck off.’

She looks confused. ‘Were you pissed?’

 ‘I did what you said: I told my reflection to stop holding me back.’

‘Did it listen?’

‘I think so.’

‘Ha, so you’re going to do it.’

‘I think so.’

She reaches up on tiptoes and kisses me on the cheek.

**Chpt**

I used the train journey back to start pulling together Tony’s report and it’s taken me the rest of the day to get it written up. It’s not my usual thing, being more concerned with observation than data analysis and I’ve had to invent a few of the verbatims since I didn’t actually end up doing any of the interviews. But I don’t feel particularly guilty as I’m confident that my conclusion is correct. It’s about eight pages long and I’ve just got time to print it out and bind it before Tony invades my apartment.

 I activate the printer, put the kettle on and upend a packet of Rich Tea biscuits onto a plate. I’ve done enough for Tony lately, so he’s not getting my Chocolate Digestives as well.

 Tony’s late as usual and by time the buzzer goes off at ten past four, I’ve bound the report in a plastic cover and have two mugs of coffee ready. I jog over to the door to let him in.

 ‘What a fucking day,’ he says, sweeping past me. His hair is slicked back, he’s wearing a stylish charcoal suit and I can see his thick gold neck chain peeking out from under a dark grey round-neck top. He plants himself at the table and picks up one of the mugs. ‘This fresh?’

 ‘Yeah, I just made it.’

 ‘Good. I need it.’ He takes a sip and waves me over. I take the seat opposite and pass across my nicely bound report.

 He flips through a couple of pages, barely glancing at it. ‘MacFadden and the team concur that you’ve identified the most likely cause of the problem.’ He closes the report and slaps it on the table. ‘You’re right, Simon. It’s the bloody tree-huggers. Don’t need a report to tell us that. All it took was a few conversations with the trainees. Once they realized they weren’t going to get fired they were very forthcoming. A quick look at their social media pages confirmed it. One or two of them have actually pledged to this boycott. We’ll fire them of course.’

 ‘Nice, Tony.’

 ‘Val-Mall is our biggest bloody client, we can’t have our own staff publicly refusing to buy their shit just because a bunch of hippies are telling them it’s bad for the trees.’

 ‘It’s not about trees.’

 ‘I simplify to make the point. Mary Pinsley’s team have spent the entire day looking into these Extermination Revolution people. What we’re seeing is that the anti-China narrative is centred around stuff like working conditions, pollution, emissions, censorship and all that whiney ballsache.’ He picks up one of the Rich Teas and lets it dangle between thumb and forefinger like it was something rancid. ‘You got the relatives coming over or something?’

 ‘No.’

 ‘So what’s with the shitty biscuits?’

 ‘They’re all I’ve got today.’

 ‘These things are barely good enough for dunking,’ he sniffs, dipping the biscuit into his coffee. ‘The big problem is that the Val-Mall’s China deal is due to be signed in a few weeks.’

 ‘You need to postpone that, Tony. Or better yet, cancel it.’

 ‘Not possible. It’s happening whether we like it not. We called in the PR people a few hours ago, emergency meeting to thrash out a crisis management strategy.’ I watch as Tony’s softened biscuit begins to buckle slowly in the middle. ‘They’re going to try a few different ideas, but broadly there are three main approaches: attack, defend and…fuck.’

The soggy half of his biscuit has just dropped into his lap. ‘Christ, this is a Tom Ford. It’s what James Bond wears.’ He pulls out a handkerchief and angrily wipes Rich Tea mulch from his trousers.

‘I expect you forgot to activate the anti-biscuit defence systems.’

‘This is what comes of offering people shitty biscuits, Simon.’

‘I apologise, Tony, for my shitty biscuits,’ I sigh. ‘What was the third thing and what does all this have to do with me?’

‘The third approach is to muddy the waters a bit. The thing is, we won’t know what’s working and what’s not working unless we can track, and most importantly, analyse sentiment changes in real time. That’s your bit, Simon.’

‘I can do that.’

‘Good, because we want to have this under control before Cy Beaglehole gets here for the national roll out of the Val-Mall Sporting Goods department.’

‘Which is when?’

‘There’ll be a soft launch at the Newbury store in two weeks.’

‘Not enough time.’

‘I know. But it’s what we have to work with. We’re not expecting miracles but we reckon we should be able to at least begin to halt the sales decline within that timeline. We start by attacking the tree-huggers, undermining their credibility as an organization and an information source. Secondly, we defend the Chinese supply chain: roll out the good news stories about the factories and general conditions and so on. Introduce some spin on behalf of the Chinese government - what they’re doing to promote sustainable energy, clean air policies and such. Thirdly, a touch of misinformation, bit of fake news. Dissidents being shot in the back of the neck with a nice, shiny silver bullet instead of a lead one. Aren’t the Chinese great, blah, blah, blah. In a month or so no one knows what to believe and they’re all back to buying cheap shite from their nearest Val-Mall. Job done, we all live happily ever after.’

‘That is just horrible, Tony.’

‘It’s spin.’

‘You can’t just make up news.’

‘Grow up, Simon. Bozza, Trump, Putin, they’re all at it. It’s how the world works.’

‘I don’t feel comfortable with this, it’s crossing a line.’

Tony selects another biscuit, dunks it and shoves the entire thing into his mouth before it can lose its structural integrity.

‘You ever play cricket?’ Tiny gobbets of mashed biscuit splatter across my table.

‘Once or twice. I wasn’t all that good.’

‘There’s usually some perpetually off-games spazzer who sits in a little box, tallying the runs.’

‘Yeah, that was me.’

‘Ok, well that’s still you. We’re not asking you to go in to bat here, or bowl the spin. You’re not playing at all. You’re just the scorer.’

I sigh, ‘fine.’

‘You don’t even have to like the way the game is played. You just have to keep an eye on the runs.’

‘I get it, Tony.’

‘Good. Start the tracking from midnight tomorrow. And let me know the score as we go along.’

‘There’ll be the third-party costs on top of my head hours.’

‘You do realise how serious this is? If this boycott gets real traction, it’s game over. You are petty cash. So do whatever it takes, Simon.’ Tony abruptly gets to his feet. ‘And for fuck’s sake, get some decent bikkies in.’

As soon as Tony leaves I grab the phone and dial up Scrutin-E, my analytics firm of choice. These people use advanced AI programs to trawl the web for positive and negative sentiment around brands. I use them from time to time to evaluate the impact of various marketing initiatives and campaigns, usually on behalf of MacFadden Springer. From my perspective, it’s money for old rope as the reports they generate are pretty well self-evident - a toddler could read them. But Tony dislikes anything that looks like raw data, so I simplify them; convert them into a basic summary with lots of multi-coloured graphs, add a good markup and everbody’s happy.

Debbie Taylor, is the client services exec there and although I’ve never actually met her face to face, I like her. She’s chirpy and smart and doesn’t try to baffle me with digital bullshit as so many of these people do. She answers her mobile on the third ring. ‘Simon. How are you?’

‘Fine thanks. Got an urgent one for you.’

‘Oh, goodie.’

‘It’s the Val-Mall.’

‘What’s occuring?’

‘I can’t say.’

‘Ok, so maybe give me a profile at least.’

‘Male and female, no skew, twenty to say, early thirties. Urban. General sentiment - positive, negative, neutral.’

She’s at her laptop, I can hear her typing away in the background. ‘Easy enough. What’s the timeferame?’

‘About a fortnight, kicking off tomorrow at midnight.’

‘We can do that. Can you give me anything particular to look for?’

‘Nothing specific. There’s no actual initiative to assess, just general attitudes towards the Val-Mall.’

There’s a pause in the typing, I can hear Debbie exhale a long breath. ‘You’re not giving us much to work with here.’

‘I know. I also want anything to do with China. Exports, politics, government, civil rights, emissions, any of that stuff.’

‘Is that connected?’

‘I can’t say.’

There’s another pause, Debbie laughs, ‘Sounds like the boycott is starting to hurt.’

‘How do you know about that?’

‘Take a wild guess. We trawl the interweb for a living or weren’t you aware?’

‘I can’t say any more.’

‘That’s fine, but let’s say we were to cross-reference China sentiment with the Val-Mall material, would you find that useful?’

I hesitate a moment but there’s no point being coy now. ‘Yes, I’d find that very useful.’

‘You must have some kind of response in the works. It would really help to have a focal point.’

‘I can’t say because I honestly don’t know, Debbie. All I can tell you is that it’ll be a big PR drive.’

‘How often do you want an update?’

‘Every forty-eight hours.’

‘That’ll cost you.’

‘I’m sure it will,’ I say with the feeling that it’s already beginning to cost me.

I’ve got nothing else coming in work-wise, so I do what I always do when I have a bit of downtime – I pull on my headset and log on to The Craft. The preliminary screen gives me a simple choice: I can use my long-term handle, SiColl7, to play my dead character but only in Phantom mode, which means I can’t actually participate or do anything much other than watch, alternatively, I can set up a brand new character with a different handle, and start from scratch, literally. A new character is the lowest of the low, a peasant whose only task is to search the village dung heaps, scratching away with a stick, sometimes for days. Eventually, you might unearth certain items that lead to a status upgrade. Even then you’ll still only be a village dung serf with a blunt knife and a teaspoon. I can’t face that, so I enter the realm as SiColl7, thief assassin, in Phantom mode.

 I activate the map to see if there’s anyone I know in the game. The map function provides an overhead view of the realm showing the location of players. In macro view you can use it to reveal clusters of activity and action hotspots but if you magnify a particular location you can actually read the handles of individual players. I zoom in on the crags of Kara-Tor, usually a good place to pick up useful spellcast items. There are hundreds of players swirling about in the vicinity all busy on a variety of quests, but I continue to search. Sure enough there’s a couple of players I recognize by their handles, battling Reapers by the looks of things – they don’t just hand out those spellcast charms for nothing.

 Even though I’m essentially a spectral presence, one or two of my former Apex-Level powers are still available to me, the ones that don’t impact the game or other players. I use a transportation charm to whisk myself off to the crags and arrive in the middle of a dust up. Dead Reapers lie all around, monstrous spiny bodies splayed in the dust. One is still standing, hard-pressed by a group of five players. The team is working together, pooling their abilities: three are Warrior Mages who make no attempt to defend themselves from the gigantic Reaper’s ice-blue firestorm, instead they concentrate on hurling a constant barrage of hex charms and Weir balls at the creature, the other two are Light Bringers who deploy a stream of healing charms and mana shields to protect the warriors. The strategy is working, finally, the creature lurches, then topples, crashing heavily into the dust.

 Behind the bodies is an iron-banded oak chest, no doubt full of potent spellcharms, icons and mystical weapons.

 A text box appears above Oakheart1205’s beefy avatar reading: “Never have I seen such courage. Felicitations all, the prize is ours.”

 “We fucking munted them,” responds Necrodude777.

 “Hello, it’s SiColl,” announces Faircaster3, spotting my floating, semi-transparent avatar.

 I move my character closer to the group so that we can activate voice protocol. ‘Impressive,’ I say into the mic.

 ‘So you’re a ghost then?’ Oakheart’s voice comes through my headphones as a reedy warble, somewhat at odds with his massively muscled avatar.

 ‘I got killed a while back,’ I sigh. ‘Long story.’

 ‘You always did take too many risks,’ tuts Faircaster3.

 ‘Shame about that, Simon,’ says Guildsman888. He’s one of the few players I’ve met in real life, at ComiCon naturally, and he’s a porky twenty-something with a gamer’s tan and an addiction to Dry Roasted Peanuts. ‘I noticed that you unfriended me on Facebook yesterday. Anything I’ve done?’

 ‘Oh, yeah, that. Sorry, I was having a bit of a rough day.’

 ‘So you decided to unfriend me. That’s fine, Simon. But don’t bother asking me to join your next Quest-Band. Oh, I forgot, you’re a ghost, you can’t form Quest-Bands, you can only float about watching other people play.’

 ‘Ok, well thanks for reminding me...uh, Guildsman.’

 ‘You’ve forgotten my real name, haven’t you?’

 He’s right, I have. When I think of him at all, which is not often, he’s Mr Peanut. And Mr Peanut does seem to be taking this particularly hard, suggesting that he has even fewer Facebook friends than I do. Or did.

 ‘Leave it alone, Keith, we should go and divvy up the spoils,’ suggests Raven033.

 Keith. That was it.

 ‘Yeah, go and haunt a house or something,’ suggests Keith-Mr Peanut-Guildsman888.

 ‘Shotgun the Jade Falchion,’ calls Oakheart1205.

 ‘Fuck off, you had first pick on the last quest,’ responds Necrodude777.

 Faircaster3 cuts in, ‘Who’s running this Quest-Band? Me. I get to decide.’

 Necrodude777 responds instantly, ‘Snooze you lose,’ his character is already sprinting for the oak chest. The group tears off in pursuit leaving me aimlessly floating a foot or so off the ground.

 ‘Bye, Simon. Enjoy playing with yourself,’ sniggers Guildsman888 through my headphones.

 I log out.

I pull off the headset and drop it onto my laptop, stunned. As a long-term Apex-Level I’ve only ever experienced a high degree of respect, bordering on awe from other players. Although I’ve partnered Tony for much of my questing over the past two years, on the occasions that I have put together a Quest-Band, other, lesser gamers have begged to be enrolled, keen to be led by an experienced and wily Thief Assassin with a reputation for strategic thinking. Now I’m Caspar The Friendless Ghost. As a non-participating outside observer, I am, for the first time, able to take an objective view. I see the Necromanticate for what it is: a colossal digital sandpit populated by spiteful, bickering children. I realise I’ve wasted a good part of my adult life charging around in a pixelated playground with a bunch of puerile sadsacks. Eringord is billed as a fantasy game, but I’d always thought that was a genre description rather than a prat-warning.

In many cultures when a young man reaches puberty there’s some form of ritual to mark the passage from boyhood to adulthood. For example, the young boys of Vanuatu must dive headfirst from a rickety platform to the ground almost a hundred feet below, trusting that the springy vine tied around their ankles will prevent them becoming one with nature – in other words, a large wet splatter on the jungle floor. It’s a demonstration of courage and worthiness to take their place amongst the tribe. Me, I’m twenty-five years old and I’m finally going to uninstall a game.

I drag the bright yellow and gold icon off my desktop and begin the process of removing the software. A few weeks ago this would have been unthinkable, now I realise that Tony was actually doing me a monumental favour when he blasted me in the back with those Pentangle Plosive Shock Hexes. This is not a fit of pique at Mr Peanut and the others, it’s an act of self-preservation, a long overdue rite of passage.

 It takes a while, my processor chugs away, deconstructing the hundreds of thousands of programmed components that comprise this immense and complex world, but eventually a window appears reading: “Eringord software, successfully uninstalled.” I sit back, amazed to feel almost no emotion whatsoever. What I do know though, is that sooner or later this decision is going to leave a big hole in my life and I’m going to need an activity to replace it, something worthwhile.

At school, when faced with the prospect of organized games or anything remotely physical, I’d run a mile – actually, amble slowly, about ten yards, in the opposite direction. As an adult, I’ve become lazier, if anything. Consequently, I’m tallish but utterly weedy. I am indeed, one of life’s cricket scorers.

 So, fitness it is.

I’ve been down this road before. A few years ago when I first arrived in London full of good intentions and determination, I joined a gym. One of those places where everyone resembles an Action Man Frogman. These people exhibit the same improbably sculpted physiques but instead of the one-piece rubber outfit, strut around in form-fitting lycra, sucking on day-glo water bottles every three minutes. Unlike me they also seem to instinctively know which way to push all the bars and handles and pull on the tensioned wire things. I’m pretty sure I could have styled it out on the equipment but it was the changing room that broke me.

I was by my locker with a towel around my waist when I was approached by a guy in his late fifties: shameless, hairy and stark naked. I’m very protective of my personal space and become quite anxious if it’s invaded, although there is no set distance, generally speaking, the demarcation zone around an individual is instinctively understood. However, should one of you happen to have his bollocks flying, I feel that the no-go territory should be at least doubled.

Instead, this individual positioned himself well inside my everyday space, hands on hips, and asked me for the time. I was unable to oblige for two reasons: one, I’d just come out of the shower, so wasn’t wearing a watch, and two, because I had a full-blown anxiety attack and fainted.

When I came to I found myself being hauled off by my arms and legs to the First Aid room by the nudist and his equally naked buddy. The under-chassis panorama from this position is something that can never be unseen and still gives me the heebie jeebies. What’s more, my own towel somehow went amiss in the kerfuffle.

So gyms are very much out for me.

And don’t ask me for the time either.

 The solution is to buy my own fitness equipment. Not a full gym’s worth of course, but probably a running machine and workout station. I browse various sports retailers and am pleased to find a Mr Buffington Fitness Multi-Workstation on special at just under two hundred quid, including next day home delivery. Amongst other things it boasts a high and low pulley system with let bar and dual function chest press/pec combination. It also has lat pulldown, pec dec and leg extension functions. This sounds just the ticket and, before I can change my mind, I type in my name and address. With a further three clicks and a debit card number this matt-black tubular device is on its way to remedy a world-class lat pec dec deficit.

Chpt

I’m sitting on my rug surrounded by unidentifiable black tubes and bits of cable. To be fair to Mr Buffington, their next day delivery was impressively punctual. What I didn’t expect was that their machine came flatpacked and in bits, thousands of them. My sleek black Fitness Workstation currently looks like an explosion in a Dalek factory. The instruction manual informs me that the torsion cable can be easily looped around the larger carriage bolt and should be secured with one of the Nylock nuts before applying tension. It’s plain English and I understand this in principle, the problem is that none of the bits I have strewn across the rug look remotely like the illustrations.

 I’m wearing a pair of baggy old shorts and a T-shirt, on the assumption that I’d be happily pumping iron this morning. I’m already knackered and I’ve only assembled the forward leg, which was easy since it came in one piece and just needed a couple of rubber buffers to be slotted on. Glaring at the mess doesn’t seem to be working, so I get up to make myself a coffee just as the buzzer goes. I’m hoping it’s the Mr Buffington delivery team back to inform me that they’ve mixed up my delivery with the Large Hadron Collider and will be making amends by bringing me a fully assembled workout station forthwith.

 ‘Surprise,’ announces the brightly coloured figure on my doorstep. ‘Nice legs, by the way.’

 ‘Shit, what?’

 ‘For a Praying Mantis,’ adds Heavenly, stepping past me. Her clothing is markedly different today from the usual drab protest attire. Her hair has been gathered up in a complicated arrangement involving a red and green patterened scarf, culminating in a kind of fluffy pink Mohawk. She wears a white linen shirt with a pale red waistcoat along with blue cotton trousers. Her neck and shoulders are draped with gauzy scarves and beads. Although she is not made up as such, beneath each eye is a patch of glittering silver. The love child of a Woodstock hippy and Captain Jack Sparrow.

 ‘How did you get here?’

 ‘On the train and then a tube to Clapham South. I am allowed out on my own you know.’

 ‘Yes, but how did you know my address?’

 ‘A little bird told me. Is that the kettle boiling?’

 The bird in question can only be Valentine. ‘Don’t get me wrong, I’m happy to see you,’ I say, mildly surprised to find that this is perfectly true, ‘but what exactly are you doing here?’

 ‘I was curious to see how you lived. Nice flat. I don’t suppose you’ve got any herbal tea?’

 ‘Just instant coffee.’

 ‘Is it Fair Trade?’

 ‘I very much doubt it.’

 ‘I’ll give it pass,’ she scrutinises the clutter spread across the rug. ‘What’s with the Meccano?’

 ‘It’s a fitness centre.’

 Heavenly guffaws. ‘That’s hilarious.’ She looks at me, assessing my billowing shorts and stick man legs and shakes her head. ‘You really need to change, Simon.’

 ‘I know, that’s why I’ve bought a Fitness Centre and quit The Craft.’

 ‘I mean you need to put some proper clothes on. We’re off to see P and B.’

 ‘This morning? Now?’

 ‘I didn’t give you advance warning in case you tried to back out.’

 ‘Fine,’ I say. ‘I could use a break.’ I can already feel little tendrils of anxiety beginning to unfurl at the prospect of meeting two individuals so famous, or notorious, that they’re known by their joint initials. But I’m determined to stop letting life pass me by and I’ve made a promise to Heavenly.

‘Can I vape?’ she asks, producing a black metal tubular gadget.

 ‘Yes, but don’t drop that thing on the rug,’ I say, as I scuttle off to the bedroom, ‘you’ll never find it again.’

By the time I emerge from my room, in jeans and a hoodie, she’s managed to assemble the bench and my living room smells of bubblegum.

We’re buzzed in to Extermination Revolution’s Lancashire Court office in the heart of London’s West End. It’s an old building, which was probably at one time a small warehouse. There’s no reception to speak of, just an underlit corridor where we’re greeted by a saturnine young man in dungarees with massively bushy hair and a nose ring. Without a word he leads us down the corridor and into the heart of the building, which is essentially a large open plan space filled with trestle tables, most of which are occupied by busy, earnest-looking young people armed with a variety of mobiles and laptops. The walls, where they can be seen, are original brick but largely covered with a variety of the organisation’s brightly coloured graphic posters. Despite the phonework, loud music blares from a powerful sound system. Perched twenty feet above it all is a scaffolding stairway leading up to a tinted glass office supported by twin steel cantilever beams. Nose ring gestures at it and grunts something unintelligible. We climb the stairs to the landing where there is an ash wood door equipped with a security cam and entry pad. Heavenly presses the button, which activates a red light on the camera, after a moment, the door softly clicks open.

 The first thing I notice on entry is the relative silence. The interior has been fitted with some kind of acoustic baffling system and the contrast with the noisy open plan area below is remarkable. The second thing I notice are all the amazingly coloured fish. The walls are not tinted glass at all, they are, in fact, a series of gigantic fish tanks. The only ambient sounds are gentle whirr of the pumps and the occasional soft splash. Lighting is subtle and has mildly blue cast, in sympathy with the relaxing aquatic ambience.

 Artfully positioned around the light wood flooring is a variety of elegant flowering plants in enameled blue pots. The room is dominated by a large driftwood desk. Behind it, a figure sits, in profile to us, with his feet up. ‘Ah,’ he says, ‘our note-finders. Perfect. I’m Ben, take a seat.’ He gestures to a couple of odd-looking chairs. ‘So, you must be Heavenly?’ She smiles. ‘Which means you must be Simon, right?’

 I nod.

 He holds up a hand, pausing me. ‘Answer,’ he orders abruptly.

 ‘Yes, I’m Simon.’

 He grins wildly, leans back further in his chair and stares up at the ceiling. ‘What’s up, you sadsack?’

 ‘Nothing,’ I reply. The first tendrils of anxiety have returned and I can feel my face heating up in the light of this unexpected and somewhat unhinged interrogation. ‘I’m fine.’

 Heavenly elbows me in the ribs and gives me a look.

 ‘All right, buddy. I can’t actually talk now, in a meeting, call you back later, ok?’ He lifts his stripy Vans off the table and spins his chair to face us, removing the Bluetooth earpiece from his right ear.

‘Sorry about that. Call from an old friend. Had to answer, you know how it is.’

Heavenly nods.

Ben smiles, displaying even, white teeth. Apart from the splash of colour supplied by the skateboarding shoes, he’s dressed all in black, giving it the full Steve Jobs, even down to the round Granny glasses. I’d put him in his early forties but he’s clearly in excellent shape. With his square jaw and feather cut, he looks like something out of a Ralph Lauren catalogue. He even speaks with a slight transatlantic twang, like an American who’s spent a good deal of time in the UK, or vice versa. ‘Firstly,’ he says, ‘I’d like to thank you both for coming to see us today. So what do you think of it all?’

‘Very… impressive.’

Ben catches the slight hesitation in Heavenly’s reply. ‘But the office. It’s not quite what you expected, is it?’

‘To be honest, no.’

He grins, not in the least offended. ‘That’s because it’s not really an office. It’s my workstation, sure. But I think of it as more of a repository where we happen to work.’ He waves an arm, indicating the tanks surrounding us. ‘Don’t worry, everybody’s thrown by this place at first, expecting, shall we say, some kind of grungy squat. But the fishtanks, not a hobby, they’re actually a haven for a good many endangered species, tropical and cold water. Likewise, on the roof of our building are greenhouses and hydroculture systems housing hundreds of species of endangered flora. It’s a drop in the ocean, but in the global struggle, sometimes the smallest things can make all the difference. Like your note perhaps. And who knows? Our humble repository may come in handy one of these days when, for example, the Red Line Torpedo Barb goes extinct in the wild.’ He smiles again. ‘Now, who’s for a Golden Latte?’

Heavenly nods enthusiastically. Ben types something into his laptop then leans back, hands placidly folded across his flat midriff. ‘So, this note. Thanks so much for sending it, Heavenly. We’re very grateful.’

‘Well, it was Simon who actually found it.’

‘In a pair of jeans, I believe. Purchased from the Val-Mall in Newbury?’

‘Yes, that’s right.’

‘And you passed it on to Heavenly, aware that she’d know what to do with it?’

‘In a manner of speaking, yes.’

‘Again, we’re very grateful to you both. This little note may turn out to be a potent weapon in the war against rapacious global corporations and their partners, these unconscionable governments. And make no mistake, it is a war, with the future of the planet at stake.’

Heavenly nods, a serious expression on her face.

Ben looks down at his laptop. He stabs a button and the door behind us clicks open to reveal Nose Ring bearing a tray on which there are three Starbucks-style cups.

‘Outstanding. Thank you, Bubbles.’

Bubbles deposits the cups on the desk with his customary lack of grace, grimaces and slouches out.

‘Bubbles is not our most gifted member in the charm department. But he can be a useful asset in some of the more, shall we say, physical endeavours.’

I pick up my cup and examine the contents. I was expecting Gold Blend but this looks and smells like someone ordered a tikka masala followed by an espresso, then vomited into a cup.

‘Don’t worry about the receptacle, Simon, it’s bamboo and reuseable. Just as the chairs you’re sitting on are actually flax fibres combined with a biodegradable material made from lactic acid.’

‘It wasn’t the cup I was worried about,’ I say.

Heavenly elbows me again.

‘Ah, you’ve never tried a Golden Latte. To be fair, it is, shall we say, an acquired taste but once you’ve acquired it you’ll never go back. It’s the shot of Tumeric that makes all the difference. Go ahead, enjoy.’

I take a sip. It’s foul.

Ben laughs. ‘And don’t stress about the boiling water we’ve just used. We produce a percentage of our own power in this building. Guess how?’

‘Hot air?’ I suggest, earning me another elbow.

‘Staff gym. Treadmills and stationary bikes rigged up to micro-inverters, AC converters and batteries. Pretty neat, eh?’

‘It’s amazing,’ announces Heavenly. It’s not clear whether she’s referring to the latte or the set-up here. Either way it’s clear that Ben knows when he has an apostle. He smiles benignly at her before turning his attention back to me.

‘Simon, you really should make an effort with that Golden Latte, you’ll end up thanking me, I promise.’

‘Go on, Simon. Down the hatch,’ adds Heavenly gleefully.

I take another sip to shut them up. The mixture coats my lips and tongue with a slimy film. I roll the mixture around my mouth trying not to retch and nod briefly like a wine connoisseur beginning to understand and appreciate the hidden depths of a vintage.

‘So, down to business. I take it you’ve brought the note?’

Heavenly reaches into her waistcoat pocket, produces the original and hands it over.

‘May I keep this?’

‘Of course, what are your plans?’

Ben steeples his fingers. ‘First, we have to be sure it’s authentic. Remember, we’re fighting this war on many fronts. Yes, it’s fundamentally about catastrophic climate change but we all know how that involves big business and government collusion, which in turn impacts workers’ rights and conditions and so on. It’s complicated, shall we say, because it’s all connected, like the eco-system it’s currently destroying. These are very powerful interests we’re up against, not to be underestimated. Your note may well be a smoking gun, evidence of factory conditions in Guangdong that are tantamount to slavery, on the other hand it might be a hoax designed to embarrass us. Simon, you’re not with us.’

‘What?’

‘You’re not with us.’

Oops, busted. I switched off in the middle of Ben’s tedious monologue, concentrating instead on surreptitiously offloading the disgusting brew into the flower pot next to my chair. ‘Sorry, I was distracted…by all the fish.’

‘No, I mean you’re not a member of Extermination Revolution.’

‘I’m afraid not. So many other demands on my time…’

‘That’s fine, Simon. It’s not mandatory,’ he smirks, before addressing Heavenly. ‘You, on the other hand…’

‘Proud to have been a member for three years.’

‘I’m aware, we checked you out. Outstanding. You even have your own group, Hevvy Opposition, I believe. Congratulations on your little movement.’

Sounds to me like he’s potty-training a toddler but Heavenly’s clearly flattered. ‘We could always use some more support but we do the best we can with what we have,’ she shrugs.

‘From little acorns, shall we say? Your commitment is first class, Heavenly and you’re to be commended, but that’s why it can’t be you.’

‘What can’t be me?’

Ben puts on a sympathetic expression, ‘We had the contents of your note examined by a Mandarin speaker, the translation is good, by the way. The syntax and grammar are all completely convincing; there’s no reason to suppose that the writer is anyone other than a young country girl laboring in one of the factories of Guangdong Province. So far, so good.’ Ben takes a long sip of his Golden Latte. ‘You can actually feel it working as it slips down, can’t you?’

‘What can’t be me, Ben?’

‘We need someone to go into the lion’s den for us. Or shall we say, the dragon’s den? Someone has to go to China and properly authenticate this. That means locating and identifying the girl. We can’t risk releasing a big story to the press unless and until we’re sure it’s for real.’

‘I’ll do it,’ announces Heavenly. ‘I’d be proud to do it.’

‘I can see that. I can really feel your enthusiasm, but you have no idea of the reach of the Chinese government and the kind of resources it can mobilise. It has to be someone entirely clean. Totally unconnected. No activist background or links whatsoever to us or any other group. If they were to grant you a visa at all you’d be under suspicion and tracked the entire time by government officials. You’d achieve nothing and might even get arrested. It’s why none of us, or anyone even remotely connected to us can do it.’ He switches his gaze to me and there it remains.

It takes me a moment to register.

‘No. Fucking. Way.’ I say.

Ben reaches for his cup and slowly finsishes the last of his Golden Latte. ‘Woah, I feel energized,’ he grins.

‘Simon’s not involved,’ states Heavenly emphatically.

Ben carefully places his empty cup on the desk. ‘We’re all involved. We all share the same planet.’

‘I can’t…’ I mutter, concious that my heart is beginning to race and I can feel that awful red glow suffusing my face.

‘It’s too much, Ben. It’s not fair to ask Simon to do this, he gets very anxious. Look at him.’

‘I’m anxious, Heavenly, we’re all anxious. Anxious about the state of our planet. Consider the futures of seven billion people and you’ll realise that this is a very small thing to ask.’

I fumble in my pocket for a Lexotan.

Heavenly breaks the impasse. ‘Would it make any difference if I told you my name’s not really Heavenly?’

‘It is. We checked you out.’

‘Heavenly’s one of my middle names. My first name is Penelope, which I detest, which is why I never use it. Officially though my name is Penelope Holmes.’

While Ben considers this new fact, I concentrate on slowing down my breathing.

‘So, what exactly is the name on your passport?’

‘Penelope. Penelope Holmes.’

‘And the middle names?’

‘Heavenly, Orchid, Nivarna.’

‘And they’re on there too?’

Heavenly nods.

Ben sighs, ‘Then I’m sorry, it’s too risky.’

Heavenly looks crushed, on the verge of tears. ‘Please, Ben. This is so important to me. I’ve always dreamed of doing something that really counts and this is my chance at that. I just want… to make a difference.’

Ben gazes at Heavenly dispassionately before slowly shaking his head. For a man who’s out to save the world, I’m not sensing a great deal of empathy or compassion here; it’s clear that he’s breaking her heart. It must be the Lexotan kicking in or perhaps it’s the Golden Latte but the words are out of my mouth before I can reconsider: ‘All right, I’ll go.’

‘Outstanding, Simon.’

‘But only if Heavenly comes too.’

‘Now wait a second…’

‘That’s the deal. Either we both go or neither of us go.’

Ben’s expression changes instantly, he gives me look of what I can only describe as pure animosity, eyes narrowed, mouth pursed. I get a sense now of how it is that this apparently mild and affable individual comes to be running a radical organization like Extermination Revolution; there’s a ruthlessness about him that he keeps well hidden beneath the veneer of the affable Golden Latte-swigging fish-fancier.

The expression disappears as quickly as it arrived to be replaced by one of his broad white grins. ‘You win, Simon. You’ve got us over a barrel here. Time is not on our side. We need to get you out there before the Chinese get wind of it and begin some kind of cover-up. So…’ he reaches across the desk, to offer me his hand, ‘welcome aboard.’

I take it, immediately discovering that he’s one of these alpha arseholes who like to assert themselves by squeezing way too hard. Or maybe he’s just doing it to punish me.

‘Rest assured, we’ll offset the carbon footprint from your flights through our tree-planting program in Kent. Now, that’s decided we should go and find Paul. He’ll need to brief you.’

 ‘Over here is our graphic design team,’ announces Ben, indicating a group of four trestle tables boasting a dozen large screen desktop macs. Only two of the stations are currenly occupied. As we pass, Ben gets a high-five from both designers. ‘The team produce a huge amount of material, all our graphics, posters, flyers and so on. Most of them have full-time jobs so they’re volunteers. Come back after six in the evening and it’ll be a packed house.’

 ‘What are those?’ asks Heavenly, pointing to a group of egg-shaped structures.

 ‘Those are our Think Podules, kind of a sensory deprivation environment, mainly for the strategy team to clear their heads and focus on an issue. Some people sleep in them but we don’t encourage that,’ he says thin-lipped. He opens his arms to encompass the remainder of the open plan area, which is filled with young activists on their mobiles or hammering away at laptops or both simultaneously. ‘Likewise, almost everyone else you see here is a volunteer, giving up their time to spread the message, mainly via word of mouth and social media.’

 ‘I can’t believe how organised it all is,’ says Heavenly.

 ‘We like to think of it as organized chaos,’ Ben smiles indulgently. ‘But as I say, after six in the evenings, it’s genuine mayhem in here. Standing room only. Maybe twice as many people getting stuck in. And let’s not forget all those amazing folks such as yourself, the unsung heros, shall we say, fighting the good fight from their own homes and workplaces.’

 ‘Where’s the funding for all this coming from?’ I ask.

 ‘Ah, there’s Paul,’ announces Ben without missing a beat.

 In a corner breakout area is a grungy-looking crowd being harangued by a skinny slaphead in a leather jacket. A few of them appear to be nursing minor injuries. ‘You never give an inch, you hear me? Giblet, you do not retreat from the filth. Ever.’

 Giblet, I assume, is the thuggish-looking tattooed twenty-year old in faded green combat trousers and hoodie who has been singled out for particular castigation.

 ‘They had dogs, Paul.’

‘I don’t care, you break ranks and the line crumbles. And then what happens?’

Giblet stares at his boots.

‘What happens?’ bellows Paul.

‘We get our pants pulled down,’ mutters Giblet.

‘We get our pants pulled down,’ confirms Paul. With that he squats and sharply tugs Giblet’s combat trousers to his ankles.

It turns out that this is a particularly cruel and unusual punishment for Giblet, given the sorry state of his undercrackers, which are baggy, riddled with holes and none too clean. Understandably Giblet quickly bends to pull his trousers back up.

‘Leave it,’ bellows Paul, pointing an emphatic finger at the trousers. ‘They stay exactly where they are until I tell you otherwise.’

Paul spins on his heel and approaches us, grimacing.

‘Paul, this is Heavenly and Simon, the ones with the note,’ says Ben.

‘I’m sorry you had to see that,’ says Paul, extending a balled fist.

I can’t tell whether he’s threatening me with a punch in the face or something worse until Heavenly bumps fists with him. I follow suit.

‘Paul is responsible for our executive actions,’ explains Ben, ‘while, as you know, I’m more concerned with formulating strategy.’

‘Which is to say I’m not afraid to get my hands dirty when I need to.’ Paul stares at me with a scary, unwavering gaze as though expecting a challenge. I look away quickly.

‘These two have agreed to go to China, Paul.’

‘Both of them?’ Paul raises an eyebrow. ‘Well that’s probably a good thing. Less suspicious as a couple. I’d go myself but I’d never get a visa. I’m on their watch list.’ Paul indicates one of the nearby trestle tables. ‘Come and have a seat, I’ll give you the lowdown.’

 We gather around the table as Paul launches into his spiel. ‘From here on in you two have nothing to do with us. We’ll be using a high street travel agent specializing in group trips to the Chinese mainland. Everything gets paid up front through one of our external accounts. First off, the travel people are gonna need your passports as soon as. They’ll fast track the applications and, assuming there’s no problem, you should be granted visas within twenty-four to forty-eight hours. All collections and deliveries will be made through commercial couriers. Tickets and accommodation will be taken care of by the travel agency and you’ll be provided with plenty of Yuan, the local currency. Spend it how you like, you’re tourists, you should act like it. You can expect to be questioned at some point. Most likely at passport control but maybe later. Don’t panic, it’s mostly routine. Get a guide book and read up on the province, points of interest, that kind of thing. The two of you decided to go to China on a whim, romantic anniversary, whatever reason you think best. A friend told you Guangdong was worth a visit. It’s not, it’s a shithole. You’re idiots, so play dumb. Make sure you’ve got enough memory in your mobiles for photos and video. You need to be ready to travel any time within the next three days.’ Paul produces a small notepad from his jacket pocket, rips out two small pages and hands one to each of us. ‘Now, write down your full name, address and contact details. A courier will arrive at your home to pick up your passports at some point this evening. Once that happens there’s no turning back. Clear?’

 ‘Clear,’ says Heavenly, eyes alight with excitement.

 ‘Perfectly,’ I mutter, flicking a glance at Giblet still standing there quivering in his baggy pants, and wondering just what the hell I’ve got myself into.

 Paul gets to his feet. ‘One last thing, Heavenly, you need to tone down the look, the magenta hair and so forth. You don’t want to draw any unnecessary attention to yourself. Dress down, try to look dull if anything.’ He turns his attention to me and grins nastily. ‘Simon, you’ve already nailed it.’

Chpt

Right now I’m experiencing an extreme a fight or flight response, only the flight in question is not currently an option. This is because the gate has been called and there’s still no sign of Heavenly. No way am I boarding without her.

 We agreed to meet in the departure lounge at Heathrow an hour or so before departure. It’s an Aeroflot flight via Moscow and, on the assumption that the catering will consist entirely of cabbage, I’ve stocked up on Marks & Spencer’s sandwiches, crisps and drinks. I’ve also browsed the the whole of WH Smith’s and eventually bought a guide book for China which has a decent section on Guangdong Province. Basically, anything to keep myself occupied for the past hour and a half so’s I don’t spin out in a total panic.

 I hear an odd singsong voice from behind me saying: ‘Excuse me, sir, are you leaving on a jet plane? Do you know when you’ll be back again?’

 My crazy person alert is blaring as I turn to see who has accosted me. At first glance the young woman appears to be perfectly normal in a bookish sort of way, I have to look twice to recognise Heavenly behind the short blonde bob, glasses and conservative long sleeved dress. ‘Where the hell have you been?’

 ‘You haven’t answered my question.’

 ‘Yes, I’m leaving on a jet plane, which by the way, has just been called. No, I don’t know when I’ll be back as I’ll probably be arrested and sent to a gulag the second we touch down.’

 ‘That’s Russia, I don’t think they have gulags in China.’

 ‘There’s a stopover in Moscow.’

 ‘Fair point.’

 ‘So where have you been?’

 ‘Stalking you. Waiting to see how long it would take you to recognize me.’

 ‘I’ve been getting very anxious.’

 ‘Oh my God, who’d have guessed?’

 ‘I’m glad you’re here now,’ I say. ‘You look completely different.’

 ‘Glasses with clear lenses, dyed my hair back to its more or less natural colour and borrowed some clothes from a very square friend of mine.’ She does a little twirl. ‘Don’t I look gorgeous?’ she sticks a finger in her mouth and pantomimes a dry retch.

 ‘Actually I think you look quite nice.’

 ‘Nice is a place in the south of France…or a biscuit. I feel like an idiot.’

 ‘We should get moving.’ I pick up my laptop case.

 ‘Saw you going through security,’ she says, with a sly smile.

 ‘I was hoping you’d missed that.’ I’m not sure why but I’d been pulled aside for a pat down. As if I wasn’t already anxious enough, I don’t like being touched and I’m very ticklish. Suffice to say that is not a good combo at one of the world’s more jittery airports.

 ‘It was like watching an episode of Mr Bean.’

 ‘So glad you enjoyed it.’

 ‘It helped.’

 ‘With what?’

 ‘To distract me.’ Heavenly picks up her own backpack and puts her arm through mine. ‘I’m petrified, Simon.’

 ‘It’ll be all right. We’ll do a bit of sightseeing, talk to a few of the locals, take some photos and be back in a few days.’

 ‘I’m not worried about what happens in China. It’s the getting there that bothers me. I’ve always been terrified of flying.’

For the first leg Heavenly remained resolutely rigid in her seat, wide-eyed, both hands squeezing my arm in a grip so tight it left bruises. There was a stopover in Moscow, which actually did turn out to be a mini gulag experience, the two of us kicking our heels for what seemed like an eternity in a bleak and featureless glass box being glared at by unsmiling officials. Once back on board I managed to convince her to try one of my Lexotan. With no resistance to benzodiazepines it didn’t just calm her down, it knocked her out cold. She slumped, head resting on my shoulder and slept the remaining six hours.

We touch down at Guangzhou Baiyun airport some eleven hours after we left. It’s the middle of the night here and Heavenly’s still a little groggy as we make our way to passport control. She goes first, ushered forward by the stony faced official in the booth. There’s a brief Q&A before her visa is endorsed with an entry stamp and she’s in.

 I tuck the completed entry card into my passport and step forward. ‘Neih hou,’ I say to impress the offical. He gimaces. I expect his English is perfectly good but he chooses to speak in clipped abbreviated sentences. ‘Why you come here?’

 ‘Tourist trip. My friend and I have come to see the sights,’ I nod in Heavenly’s direction.

 My answer elicits no response, instead, he examines my entry card carefully. ‘You stay Zhongshan, why?’

‘Cheaper,’ I reply.

He tuts and shakes his head, unimpressed. Finally holds my passport up flicking his gaze from the photo and then back to me. I know I’ve done nothing wrong but this level of scrutiny has triggered a bout of anxiety, which in turn has ignited a facial furnace the approximate shade of his national flag.

 He’s bored, it’s the middle of the night and he’s decided to mess with the guilty-looking foreigner; he holds my passport up, turns the photo page towards me and points to my face, ‘Not same colour,’ he announces, pretending to be confused.

 ‘Hot,’ I explain, fanning my face with my hand. ‘Phew,’ I add for additional authenticity.

Evidently this nuanced yet highly expressive improvisation proves sufficiently convincing, at length the official lowers my passport, flicks to the visa page and slams down his rubber stamp. He stamps my entry card and tears off the official section which goes onto his pile. ‘Welcome to the People’s Republic of China,’ he says, returning my passport.

We retrieve our rucksacks, chosen to lend credence to our status as freewheeling young sightseers, and follow the signs through the surprisingly modern arrivals hall to the taxi rank. Touts buzz around us like flies. On the blogs they warn you that these unofficial drivers are likely to rip you off or worse so we airily brush them off as we pass through the concourse. We leave the air-conditioned interior and the humidity slaps us like a damp sock. Evidently queueing is not big in China so we elbow our way through the small crowd to a line of green and silver liveried cabs. We commandeer one and I give the driver a cheerful “neih hou” along with a printed sheet showing the name and location of our hotel. The driver is a stick-thin man of indeterminate age with a missing front tooth, his hair is thinning and plastered across his scalp with what looks and smells like rancid butter. He laboriously pencils a number on a scrap of paper, four hundred yuan, the equivalent of about forty-five quid. At this stage we’re both way too tired to even try and haggle. I nod and we’re whisked off into the night.

We doze in silence and, about an hour and a half later, pull up outside a greyish wedge-shaped hotel emblazoned with red and yellow chinese characters. Though it’s not quite five a.m. people are up and about. Pedestrians amble past on their way to work or perhaps, returning from a shift. There are already more than a few cars on the road adding to the ubiquitous bicycles and motor bikes, which weave deftly in and out to form a steady stream.

I’m too cowardly not to leave a tip so I let Heavenly deal with the fare. She hands the driver four red notes, the exact amount agreed and, naturally, he accepts without the slightest fuss or recrimination, pulling away with a gap-toothed smile.

Inside, the hotel lobby is all faux marble flagging, punctuated by brightly coloured, exotic blooms arranged in tall, stainless steel pots along with a row of surrealist chrome blobs on plinths. Perfumed sticks infuse the air with the pleasant smell of incense. Our arrival arouses little interest from the elderly codger who continues to trail a broad-headed mop ever so slowly back and forth across the shiny floor.

Once again our passports are required, the officious young man at the desk disappears for a while to take photocopies and fill in the interminable forms. ‘For the local police,’ he informs us. ‘Police must be informed of all visitors.’

Heavenly hands over another three hundred Yuan in cash as a room deposit before we are finally given our key cards. We take the lift to the second floor despite the fact that our room number begins with an eight.

The lift doors open and we’re greeted by the sight of a migraine-inducing patterened carpet running the length of an wide overlit corridor. We locate our room about halfway down; Heavenly swipes her card and we enter to find it clean and relatively well furnished. There is, however, only one bed, albeit kingsize.

‘Oh,’ I say, genuinely taken aback.

Heavenly, on the other hand, quite unashamedly hoists her dress up over her head to reveal orthodox white cotton underwear. ‘Don’t be a baby, Simon. We’re a couple and we’re sharing a room, get used to it. I’m desperate for a shower.’ She rummages in her rucksack for her washbag.

I occupy myself with unpacking my own rucksack as she strides past me to the bathroom.

I’ve never found people easy. Heavenly though, I’ve come to trust. Despite the fact that she’s impulsive and outspoken, curiously, I feel calmer and somehow less anxious when I’m around her. But this is a new person, someone I don’t recognise. I’m struck by the terrifying reality that I’m sharing a hotel room with an actual woman.

After ten minutes or so she returns swathed in white cotton towels, including one wrapped around her head like a turban. ‘That is so much better.’ She climbs into bed and pulls the duvet up to her neck. ‘I cleaned my teeth,’ she announces with a rictus grin. ‘It’s such bliss to have clean teeth.’

‘I think we should get started.’

‘You’re only saying that because there’s only one bed. It’s ok, Simon. You’re allowed to have a lie down.’

‘I’m not tired.’

Heavenly considers me for a moment. ‘I’m sorry, Simon, I’ve made you uncomfortable.’

She’s either very intuitive or I must be pathetically transparent. ‘I’m fine, honestly.’

‘Look, I won’t bite and I promise not to touch you in your special place.’

‘I’m off to explore,’ I announce, picking up my passport and slotting it into my trouser pocket.

‘Suit yourself,’ she replies. ‘Wake me in a couple of hours.’

Outside, the sun is up and the volume of traffic has noticeably increased. The air has a brown tinge, and combined with the humidity feels oppressive and unwholesome. Hawkers have already set up their stalls along the road, selling energy tea and round white buns. They offer up their goods and call out friendly greetings in what I assume to be Cantonese as I pass. I demur, resolving to have breakfast in the hotel when I return.

 I follow signs directing me to Shaxi Park and, by the time I reach the ornamental arch at the entrance, I’m perspiring. Ahead of me stretches a tiled pathway leading to a white statue of a cheerful big-bellied Buddha seated on a granite plinth. On either side are bronze castings of a various creatures. A line of mainly elderly people occupy the path ahead; all perfectly still. Some have their eyes closed, yet there’s a sense of expectation about them as though they’re awaiting some kind of signal.

 A dumpy grey-haired woman in silk pyjamas at the head of the line gestures me forward. I shake my head and retreat a couple of paces. She breaks ranks and, to my alarm, bustles towards me, elbows flying. For a moment, I’m afraid that I might have committed a terrible trespass or barged in on some weird religious ritual.

 To my relief I see that she’s grinning, so perhaps they’re just having a lesson in queueing. At any rate, she grabs me by the arm and hauls me towards the group. Despite the fact that I’ve got about two foot on her, she’s determined, and through a combination of pushing and a bit of dragging I’m forced to join the line. She grins up at me and performs a couple of slow arm and leg movements. By her gestures I understand that I’m required to do likewise. I’m reasonably certain now that I’ve been dragged into an early morning Tai Chi session, so I vaguely wave my arms around and raise my right leg before slowly extending it. No doubt it’s more John Cleese than Jackie Chan but it elicits a burst of applause and some amused chatter from the group.

Happy as I am to spread joy and good cheer as well as doing my bit for Anglo-Sino relations, I do feel my work here is done. I loathe attracting attention of any kind and am beginning to feel a touch anxious. On the up side, I’m in no danger of blushing since I’m still red-faced and perspiring from the walk. I bow briefly and step away.

Not good enough. I’m dragged back into line. The old woman squats behind me and starts to manipulate my left leg, forcing the knee upwards then stepping the leg outwards and slightly to the side. I’m not at all happy having my thigh roughly grabbed like this so I quickly repeat the move under my own steam just to get her to lay off. I throw in a few Kung Fu-style arm actions of my own devising for good measure.

The old bully rises and scuttles round to face me. She grabs my arms, bends them at the elbow and tucks my thumbs into my waistband. Clearly my flying fists have not been properly appreciated; I can only assume she is not of the Shaolin school.

The woman mirrors my stance, elbows out, thumbs tucked in and raises her leg. She slowly steps out and slightly to the side bringing her heel down first. Then she does the same thing with the right leg. I follow suit, nervous that I’ve missed some subtlety of motion that might earn me instant derision or a flying kick in the balls. She grins, a reddish-brown betel nut rictus, then claps. The rest of the line follow suit. As do a group of spectators who have congregated to one side of the path. No doubt park walkers who have stopped to watch the visitor make a tool of himself.

A young girl of about seven points at me, says something to her mother then laughs: “Ha, ha, ha, did you see the beanpole westerner try to do the Double Teapot position? Ha, ha, ha, more like Giraffe Stepping in Dogshit.” At least I assume that’s what she said. But then of course my Cantonese is entirely limited to the words, “neih hou”.

The elderly woman positions herself in front of me so I’m now second in the line. She adopts the elebows akimbo stance and turns briefly to check on me. Content that I have adopted the prescibed pose she yells something in Cantonese, which sounds like a three, two, one countdown.

Wailing music blares from a tinny but powerful speaker somewhere near the rear of the line. It’s a combination of flute and some kind of keening electric violin sound along with drums and gongs. A male voice begins to sing and, although the combination of sounds is typically chinese, the melody is familiar to me.

In front of me the old biddy croons along to the music in a cracked falsetto, she raises her left leg and kicks out and to the side, landing her heel on the beat. I’m late but manage to catch up. The right leg is next so I’m ready, I land my heel in time. Now the woman turns, I do likewise and with, a swift glance to my left can see that the entire line is moving in perfect sychronisation. I step out with the left leg and land my heel, which is when I realise why the music is familiar. It’s Achy Breaky Heart rendered in Chinese. I take another peek down the line and see that one or two Stetsons have made an appearance, a few of the oldies are wearing gumboots.

I do my best to follow as the line turns, moves forward then backwards, dosey does or whatever, turns back again and step kicks, all more or less in time to the music; only occasionally earning a shove from the old bruiser as I move the wrong way or miss a kick. I’m soaked in sweat by the time the track finally comes to an end.

Bully Ray Cyrus is now my best friend and she pats me delightedly on my sweaty back as I edge away. A large crowd has now gathered and I receive another round of applause as I consider my escape route.

‘You are from England?’ An American accented voice from somewhere in the crowd. A young man in his early twenties elbows his way to the front. He’s dressed in shapeless black trousers and a white shirt; his round tortoiseshell spectacles give him a grave, somewhat studious air.

‘I am.’

‘I knew it. I could tell from your poor dentistry that you were not an American. Also, since you were trying to smile and make yourself agreeable you could not be Russian.’

He extends his hand, which I shake.

‘My name is Tan Wen Cheng. Wen Cheng means educated and accomplished, which I believe was far-sighted of my parents.’

‘Simon. Nice to meet you, Wen, but I have to get out of here.’

‘Yes, you have become a source of considerable attention with your inadequate line dancing.’

‘I should get back to my hotel.’

‘I would be happy to help. It would be no trouble at all.’ Wen walks with his hands clasped behind his back and has a slightly hunched posture giving him the air of a much older person.

‘I’m fine but thank you.’

He indicates the crowd behind him which shows no signs of dispersing, and, even though a Chinese version of the Macarena is now playing, the rubber-neckers are still far more interested in me than the line dancers. ‘I should warn you they will most likely follow you all the way to your hotel. They will try to ask you questions and some of them may try to touch you.’

‘Why?’

‘They are curious about you, of course. You have no concept of face.’

‘In what way?’

‘As a foreigner you have a certain status. They are confused that you would so readily cast aside your dignity and allow yourself to appear ridiculous.’

‘I thought I did quite well all things considered.’

‘No, your performance was truly atrocious. You must understand that although they are mostly ignorant, they know this form of dancing is from the West and so assume you to be an expert. They cannot understand why you would make such a …show.’

‘I thought it was Tai Chi.’

‘Tai Chi is very different.’

‘Yes, I am aware of that.’

‘Perhaps, like many Westerners, you are an exhibitionist and crave attention. Since you do not require my help, I will leave you now.’ He gives me a slight bow.

‘No, I’m the opposite. Crowds make me nervous.’ While we’ve been talking the mob has been slowly edging forward and has almost surrounded us.

‘So, you would appreciate my assistance here?’

‘Yes, Wen, I would.’

Wen spins on his heel and bellows furiously at the crowd, gesticulating wildly with his arms. It seems to do the trick; they back away, cowed.

‘Impressive. What did you say?’

‘I informed them you are an honoured guest of the People’s Republic; that you find them to be both ignorant and bad-smelling. Their attentions are insulting to you.’

‘Ok, that may have been a bit strong.’

 ‘That is because you are English and so never say what you really mean. You prefer to hide behind…innuendo in your speech. Do I have the word correct?’

‘Yes, Wen. Your English is immaculate.’

‘It should be. I spent five years at the University of the Cumberlands in Kentucky and hold a master’s degree in Engineering.’

‘You’re an engineer?’

‘No. Where are you staying please, Simon?’

‘The City Comfort Inn on Luquan Road.’

Wen nods. ‘I will walk with you, if I may.’ He takes my arm and guides me back towards the ornamental arch.

‘To answer your previous question, I perform translation services for the factories in Zhongshan. My English is, as you say, immaculate.’

‘You decided not to be an engineer?’

‘The government, in its wisdom, decided I would not make a satisfactory engineer.’

‘How so?’

‘I spent some time in Hong Kong before returning to the mainland, unwisely involving myself in activities that were thought to be critical of the government.’

‘Protests?’

‘Yes, marches and protests and so forth. My loyalty is considered to be questionable.’

As we approach Longxing Middle Road, Wen pauses. ‘We should wait a little.’

‘Why?’

‘If you look back you will see a gentleman in a grey suit some distance behind us. That is The Laizhou Hong.’

I turn my head. Sure enough about thirty yards behind is a middle-aged individual slowly following in our footsteps. Unusually he appears to have reddish hair. ‘I see him.’

‘He is a plainclothes policeman.’

‘Is he following us?’

‘Of course. That is his function. He is The Laizhou Hong.’

I stare at Wen, puzzled.

‘Laizhou Hong. The breed is known to be persistent, loyal and resolute, sometimes called the Chinese Red Dog.’

‘On account of his…’ I indicate my hair.

‘A cheap dye used by many of the older generation to keep the hair black; after a time it fades to a reddish colour. The Chinese Red Dog is also known for its large ears. Laizhou Hong’s role is to follow and to listen.’

‘He’s not exactly blending in with the hair.’

‘He has no need to. There is no purpose in evading him, since I have nowhere to go. It is easier to wait and let him follow. In any event, he will find you far more interesting.’

‘Hang on, you’re palming your police tail off on me?’

‘Your hotel will have already informed the local police. As a person of interest your activities will certainly be monitored. The Laizhou Hong has now observed us turning into the road, we may proceed.’ We set off down the busy Longxing Middle Road.

‘But The Red Dog has seen me talking to you.’

‘These days I am a model citizen. In a year or so, I expect the prefecture will allow me to secure employment as an engineer. The local police only follow me for appearance sake.’

‘Why don’t I find that reassuring?’

Wen smiles, ‘This is China. Not everything is as it seems.’

‘Simon,’ I hear Heavenly’s voice over the grumble of the traffic and quickly spot her seated at one of the plastic tables by one of the hawker’s stalls. Blonde hair aside, a more familiar version of herself in linen shorts, loose shirt and large round sunglasses. She waves us over and pours herself a small cup of tea from the pot. ‘I’ve just had the most amazing porridge.’

‘I’d like you to meet someone,’ I say.

Heavenly grins, ‘You’ve been getting to know people. I’m impressed.’

We both take a seat at the table.

‘Wen.’

‘Now’s good.’

‘No, this is Wen.’

‘Heavenly. Nice to meet you.’

Wen reaches over and takes her hand, ‘Heavenly is a most beautiful name,’ he announces solemnly, without releasing it. ‘In Cantonese we would say Tin Tong. May I call you this?’

‘Oh, yes. I’d like that.’

Wen continues to examine her hand. ‘I had not expected Simon to be accompanied by such a splendid companion. You have delicate features, Tin Tong. It is a form of beauty highly prized in China.’

Wen has transitioned from a stiff, slightly nerdy owl to Russell Brand-style chat-up monster within seconds. It’s obvious I’m going to need to cut this short and get our mission back on track. ‘I was trying to gain the trust of the locals,’ I explain, ‘Wen came and introduced himself.’

Wen finally releases Heavenly’s hand. ‘It was necessary for me to intervene with the crowd who were surrounding your companion.’

‘How come?’ Heavenly takes a sip from her little cup.

‘I came upon Simon dancing in the park. The spectators were less than enchanted by his performance.’

Heavenly spurts tea. ‘Oh God, that’s hilarious.’

‘Hang on, that’s not quite…’ My further explanation is curtailed by the presence of the hawker.

Wen fires off a swift stream of Cantonese to which the hawker gives a deferential reply. Wen turns to me. ‘Green tea, Simon?’

‘Try the porridge, it’s pretty good,’ advises Heavenly.

‘Congee,’ corrects Wen.

‘Just the tea,’ I say.

Wen emits another stream of Cantonese whilst indicating Heavenly; the hawker emphatically shakes his head a few times before scuttling back to his cart. Wen returns his attention to Heavenly. ‘You have not yet paid for your tea and congee.’ A statement, not a question. Nevertheless, Heavenly shakes her head. ‘I have warned the vendor not to attempt to overcharge you.’

Heavenly smiles gratefully. ‘Where are you from, Wen?’

‘From Guangzhou. I was educated in the USA.’

‘Ah, that explains your English.’

‘My English is imacculate. I am a translator.’

‘Perfect. So how’d you feel about translating for us, just for a day or two? We can pay you.’

‘You honour me, Tin Tong. I shall consider it.’

The hawker returns with another teapot and two small cups, which he places before us accompanied by a series of sheepish nods and bows.

‘How’s three hundred Yuan a day sound? I’m sorry, I don’t mean to offend you.’

Wen produces a handkerchief, removes his spectacles and slowly polishes them. ‘There is no offence. Three hundred is generous.’

‘Wait, wait,’ I say, ‘that is not a good idea. Wen’s being followed by the police.’

Wen slowly replaces his spectacles. ‘I have explained to Simon that, sooner or later, you will both come under some degree of scrutiny. Being foreigners here, it is inevitable. Better you are followed by The Laizhou Hong, who is old and lazy, than one of the younger, more zealous officials.’

‘Laizhou Hong?’

I jerk my thumb behind me to indicate the plainclothes man who is currently pretending to examine the price board at the bun vendor’s stall. ‘Local policeman,’ I explain. ‘Wen calls him The Red Dog.’

‘Makes sense to me. So how about it, Wen?’

‘Why should you require the services of a translator? It is not so difficult to make yourself understood.’

Heavenly considers for a moment. ‘So we don’t get overcharged.’

‘Yet you offer me three hundred Yuan a day? I think not.’ Wen refills his little cup in silence. Heavenly stares intently as he takes a delicate sip.

Finally, Heavenly breaks the impasse. ‘We need to speak with people in the factories. Proper conversations.’

Wen smiles slowly. ‘For what purpose? Forgive my persistence but I must take care not to antagonize the government.’

‘Can I trust you, Wen?’

Wen nods slowly. ‘Up to a point. I am unable to assist in lawless behavior.’

‘Nothing we’re doing is unlawful. We simply want to find out about the conditions in the factories here.’

‘Why?’

‘There have been allegations of mistreatment.’

‘So, who are you really, Tin Tong? Journalists?’

‘Yes.’

Wen finishes his tea impassively. ‘There is no story here. Factory employees are poorly paid and are expected to work hard but that is the case everywhere. There is nothing unusual to discover in Zhongshan.’

‘Then that is what we’ll report. So you’ll help us?’

‘I will translate for you.’

‘Great. Let’s get to work.’

Wen shrugs, ‘The day shifts have already commenced. We must be patient. Perhaps at six this evening it may be possible to speak with the night workers before they begin their labours.’

I’m conscious that I have my own work to do for MacFadden Springer: a summary of the latest batch of results from Scrutin-E. If I don’t send a report in soon I’ll have Tony on my back and I can’t imagine he’ll be thrilled to discover I’m over here on a fact-finding mission on behalf of Extermination Revolution. ‘In that case, I think I’ll go back to the hotel for a nap,’ I announce, with a genuine yawn. ‘The jet lag’s beginning to catch up.’

‘You should have had a sleep earlier like I said instead of prancing about in the park,’ declares Heavenly. ‘What’s to do round here, Wen?’

‘Zhongshan City has many attractions. First though, I should very much like you to see Zhongshan Zhan Park, the largest private garden in China. There are pagodas, lakes, bridges and very many beautiful things. It is a quadruple A-rated tourist site.’

‘Sounds wonderful.’

‘Then I should be honoured to escort you, Tin Tong.’ Wen glances at me with a smug little smile. If he had moustachios he’d be twirling them. The bastard.

I’ve compiled a brief summary of Debbie’s analysis. No surprises here: in the main, it still reveals a high degree of negative sentiment towards China and the Val-Mall amongst twenty to thirty year olds, what’s more, a significant percentage of them have pledged to boycott chinese factory-produced goods. There is, however, some evidence of positive response to the spin that’s been produced over the past week. Most notably, the announcement that the massively popular rock band, ThoughtCrime, have agreed to do a tour of Beijing and Shanghai next month. Debbie has sent me a link to the Channel 4 interview. I open it and see lead singer, Figgsy, in his trademark wrap-around sunglasses and pork-pie hat, in a studio somewhere. On a coffee table before him is a large glass bowl of M&Ms, but only the blue ones, as these are known to be the only kind Figgsy will deign to eat. Sprawled grumpily in the chair next to him is The Mullet. A pointless addition, since The Mullet is resolutely reticent. The third band member, the drummer, Knowles, is absent. True to form, The Mullet keeps his sulky gob shut while Figgsy talks earnestly to camera, blethering on about all the extraordinary advances being made by the Chinese government: relaxation of censorship; workers’ rights and the incredible efforts being taken to reduce carbon emissions. Something we should all try to emulate.

A bit rich this: hearing Figgsy pontificate about carbon emissions when he’s notorious for only ever travelling on a private jet. And one time, on a tour of the states, having forgotten his lucky pork-pie hat, sent his fuel-guzzling plane all the way back to Manchester to retrieve it. Nevertheless, I can’t help but be impressed that the PR smoke and mirrors seem to be kicking-in so quickly.

This is the substance of the report summary I send through to Tony, illiustrated by some simple brightly coloured graphs. I check my phone and, thankfully, there are no missed calls. I can only imagine Tony is being kept busy sorting through bags of M&Ms.

I’m genuinely shattered now and probably a bit dehydrated. I drink half a bottle of mineral water from the mini bar and pour the rest into a glass on the bedside table. I peel off my clothes and flop onto the bed in my boxer shorts. As I hit the pillow I catch a waft of Heavenly’s scent: patchouli, or some kind of incense. I close my eyes and slowly inhale.

**Chpt**

I’m devastated.

Heavenly is explaining why she has decided to remain in China with Wen. Cities here are far less polluted than the UK and there are no profit-hungry malls or mega-stores, in any case, Wen has bought her some amazing sapphire earrings as a token of his esteem. I know damn well that the earrings are not sapphires, they’re just blue M&Ms, but Heavenly refuses to see this.

 Something wet and clammy has crawled into my ear. I jerk awake, opening my eyes to find Heavenly sitting on the side of the bed examining me.

‘Wass…wha…’

‘You were muttering in your sleep, Simon.’

‘What?’

‘I think it might have been a nightmare; I had to stick my finger in your ear to wake you up.’

I take a sip from the water glass by the bed. ‘That’s not how you wake people up.’

‘Well, it woke you up.’

‘It was wet.’

Heavenly sniggers. ‘It’s called a wet willy. I expect because it feels like a wet willy. In your ear.’

‘That’s gross.’

‘It’s only water, Simon. You’re so…prissy.’

‘There will have to be payback,’ I say, waggling my finger in the violated earhole.

‘It’ll just have to wait. I should get changed.’ She rises and opens the wardrobe where she has arranged a few articles of clothing. She selects a light summer dress.

‘What time is it?’

‘After five.’

‘So, how was your day?’ I ask tentatively.

‘Fine. Hot though. Zhongshan Zhan park was lovely, then we went to Sun Yat Sen’s residence, which was just a lot of history and old furniture really. Poor Red Dog had to traipse around behind us in the heat all day.’

She walks off to the bathroom taking the dress with her. I can see that my clumsy reaction last night has put a distance between us and now there’s a lead weight in my stomach. I desperately want her to like being around me. I know that much from the dream.

She emerges some ten minutes later, showered and already dressed. I’m sitting on the side of the bed in my boxer shorts, aware of what a hypocrite this makes me. Nevertheless, I’m going to try and clear the air with her. ‘Heavenly,’ I say, ‘I need to tell you…’

‘There’s something I have to tell you first,’ she says abruptly. ‘Something important.’

I’m hoping that this has nothing to do with Wen or jewelry made from M&Ms.

‘I haven’t been entirely honest with you,’ she explains. ‘A couple of days ago, while we were waiting for the visas and travel documents, I received a message via one of the couriers.’

‘Oh, yes?’

‘It was from P&B; I didn’t bring it because I had to shred it.’

That doesn’t sound good. ‘Very cloak and dagger.’

‘The jist of it is: if this girl, Precious Jade, is what she seems to be; if she’s genuinely being held against her will in this factory… they want us to try to get her out.’

‘You can’t be serious.’

‘I’d like your help, Simon, but I know it’s a lot to ask. If you can’t, I promise I won’t think any the worse of you.’

I hold my head in my hands. I had thought to use this opportunity to gently address the elephant in the room, instead, Heavenly has just unleashed the horrifying lovechild of Godzilla and a mastodon, a great rampaging juggernaut of terror. ‘We’re in China, Heavenly, the most tightly controlled, closely monitored state on the planet. You’re a British activist and I’m a… a sadsack, a fantasy gamer with social anxiety disorder. We are not the Mossad.’

‘I thought you said you’d given up gaming.’

I look up to find her grinning at my discomfort. ‘It’s a ridiculous ask.’

‘Relax, Simon. It’s no biggie.’

‘It’s crazy. Get her out of the factory, and then what?’

‘They meant get her out of the country.’

‘That’s insane.’ My heart is pounding so badly I have to grab my chinos from the carpet and scrabble around in the pockets for my Lexotan. I pop one in my mouth and knock it back with the remainder of the water.

‘It’s not that bad actually. There’s a plan. A simple one. We take her a few miles south of here in a taxi to a place called Tangjia Bay …’

‘We?’

‘Ok, I take her to Tangjia Bay. There’s construction down there so it’s pretty deserted at night other than for a few fishing boats. I have the number of a fisherman in my mobile who’s willing to ferry her over to Lantau. That’s Hong Kong, Simon. Once there, she’ll be met by an Extermination Revolution sympathiser from the Mid-Levels who will take her in and provide new paperwork. From there she’ll fly to Malaysia where she claims asylum. And, hopefully, gives a bunch of press conferences with P and B.’

‘Nice of Pull-Your-Pants-Down and Big-Head to make an appearance at the grand finale. When it’s safe.’

‘That’s not fair, I thought Ben was very modest, considering everything that he’s achieved. I imagine we just caught Paul at a bad time.’

‘A bad time for Gilbert.’

‘Giblets.’

‘Whatever.’

‘Anyway, you know they can’t be here. They would be if they could.’

‘There are just so many things that could wrong with that plan.’

‘Well, that’s the easy bit. Getting her out of the factory is the tricky part.’

‘So how are you planning to do that?’

‘I have no idea.’

‘This is Little Plum, who works as a cutter at the Sunshine Textile Company. She says she will speak with you if you buy her a bean paste bun.’

 Little Plum resembles quite a large plum as it happens. Although it is still warm this evening, she wears a brightly patterned purple anorak with the hood tightly fastened around her doughy face. She must only be about seventeen or eighteen but her eyes are deep set with dark shadows beneath. She doesn’t smile.

 ‘Yes, please tell Little Plum I’d be very happy to buy her a bun.’

 ‘It is three yuan.’

 ‘That’s fine,’ I nod in affirmation.

 Little Plum murmurs something to Wen.

 ‘Little Plum would also like a beverage to accompany her bean paste bun.’

 ‘I can do that,’ I nod for Little Plum’s benefit.

 ‘She has asked for a Coca-Cola. This seems extravagant to my thinking.’

 ‘A Coca-Cola is fine.’

 ‘It is four yuan. A glass of warm water would be sufficient.’

 ‘We can stretch to a Coke, Wen.’

 Wen purses his lips in disapproval before giving Little Plum the good news. She nods gravely as though her chosen beverage was never in any doubt before wiping her slightly snotty nose with her sleeve. Wen waves over the boy to place the order. ‘In that case, I should also like a Coca-Cola.’

‘Knock yourself out, Wen. Tea?’

Heavenly nods absently. Wen barks the order in Cantonese and the boy scuttles away.

‘So,’ announces Wen, ‘now you should ask your questions.’

Heavenly leans across the table, focusing on Little Plum, though the girl is reluctant to meet her gaze. ‘Little Plum, we understand that you have just come off shift at your garment factory.’

Little Plum lowers her head and picks at the cuticle on her left thumb. She speaks with a soft, gentle voice delivering a surprisingly lengthy response, full of mournful pauses and false starts.

‘Yes,’ translates Wen.

‘Even we can tell that she said a lot more than just “yes”,’ objects Heavenly.

Wen shrugs, ‘She is very boring and stupid. I did not wish to insult you with her dull complaints, Tin Tong.’

Heavenly sighs, ‘We’re not paying you to be an editor, Wen. Translate what she says please.’

Wen pouts, ‘Little Plum was speaking of her village and how she came to be in Shaxi. Her father is dead and her mother is too lazy to feed her brothers and sisters. Little Plum works to provide money for the family and so on. It is all highly tedious to hear.’

‘Her mother is too lazy to work?’

‘Yes.’

‘I don’t believe you. Ask her again and translate properly or I’ll be forced to withdraw your Coca-Cola privileges.’

I can see that Wen is becoming tetchy and frankly, I’m rather pleased at the signs of trouble in paradise. We’re interrupted by the boy bringing the order. The Cokes arrive in classic bottles with stripy paper straws, the bun comes on a small white plate and is placed in the centre of the table, a softly round pristine white blob, resembling a snow covered hillock. Little Plum grasps her bottle with both hands and sucks away urgently as though someone might be about to snatch it from her. Wen, most likely.

Heavenly pours us both tea from the round glass pot and as I hand the boy fifteen yuan in notes, waving away the change; I can see that Wen is on the verge of objecting at my profligacy when he restrains himself, reaching for his own bottle instead.

 He sips and flicks a glance at Heavenly before speaking to Little Plum. This time, he offers a more credible translation. ‘She informs me that her mother spends much of the time in bed. She is sick with headaches and cannot feel her hands.’

Little Plum is now shovelling away the bun with evident enjoyment.

‘Now ask her to describe the conditions in the factory please.’

Wen translates. There’s a pause while Little Plum extracts the last of her Coke with a noise like drain. She responds slowly, enabling Wen to translate as she speaks.

‘She lives in a factory dormitory with five other girls. Their ages are between sixteen and nineteen. One of the girls has a CD player, so there is sometimes dancing in the evenings if the girls are not too tired. Little Plum enjoys dancing although she says she is too fat to be much good… I agree.’

‘Not interested in what you think, Wen.’

Wen grimaces before continuing. ‘Little Plum begins her shift at seven a.m. There are two breaks for tea and other necessary functions, which must be no longer than ten minutes. They are allowed thirty minutes for lunch in the canteen but the food is very bad, she says. Shifts are supposed to finish at six p.m. but most days they will be required to continue working until nine or ten. If there is a rush order then they might work until two or three in the morning. The work is hard and it is often very hot in the factory but if they fall asleep at work they will be punished. The supervisors are very strict. And they beat the workers if they are not happy with the standard.’

‘That’s just awful,’ says Heavenly.

‘Listen, Tin Tong,’ interjects Wen, ‘I think Little Plum is exaggerating. Conditions are not easy in the factories but I believe she is stretching the truth in the hopes of another bun.’

‘Enough, Wen,’ snaps Heavenly. ‘Ask her why she doesn’t just leave?’

Wen relays this causing Little Plum to look perplexed. ‘Where could I go? What could I do? The factories keep some of our wages. If we were to quit they would not return this to us. They claim it is to cover their expenses.’

Heavenly takes a sip of her tea, considering this. ‘What about holidays? Are you given time off?’

‘Ahh,’ says Little Plum, nodding effusively before rattling off another stream of Cantonese.

‘At New Year. If we are lucky, and have managed to save enough, we may return home at New Year. But most of the workers, like me, are from the villages and our families rely on the money we earn, transport is very expensive and so many of us simply remain in the factories at this time.’

Little Plum shrugs eloquently. Heavenly gives her a smile. ‘Please see if she knows of someone called Precious Jade from the Lucky Orchid Factory.’

Wen duly obliges. Little Plum licks her finger, uses it to catch a stray crumb from the table and pops it into her mouth before replying.

‘No, I don’t know that person although I have a cousin who works on the night shift at the Lucky Orchid Factory. She will probably know her. The boss of Lucky Orchid is the worst of all. It is well known.’

‘Will your cousin speak to us?’

Wen translates, Little Plum considers then nods.

‘And?’

For the first time Little Plum smiles, displaying wonky tombstone teeth. She mutters something to Wen.

‘Little Plum will arrange it but would like another Red Bean bun in return.’

‘Done,’ agrees Heavenly.

‘And a Coca Cola.’

Wen is uncharacteristically taciturn as we head back to the hotel, I suspect because he realises that his snotty-arse behaviour is not playing so well with Heavenly. After ten minutes or so he announces that he’s heading home for the evening. We agree to meet outside the gates of the Lucky Orchid factory at seven a.m. sharp tomorrow morning, where hopefully, we’ll rendevouz with Little Plum’s cousin, the appropriately named Morning Star. Wen heads off down one of the many side streets leaving Heavenly and myself to wander the shopping strip - actually, Heavenly, me and Red Dog, who, worryingly, now seems to have attached himself to us.

 Not surprisingly, given that we are slap bang in the heart of the garment manufacturing distict, the stalls hereabouts are devoted to clothing. In the main, small one-room stalls bursting with piles of cheap textiles, which erupt out onto the pavement.

 Heavenly quickly homes in on a pile of black cotton drawstring trousers, sizing up a few pairs against her waist. ‘Perfect,’ she announces before selecting a black cotton top.

‘Perfect for what?’ I ask, already knowing the answer.

‘A little naughty nightware,’ she grins. ‘What d’you reckon?’

 ‘I reckon I want nothing to do with it.’

‘Why not?’ ’She unfolds a much longer pair of black trousers, eyeing me. ‘You’d look good in black.’

‘I’ve told you, it’s insane. You can’t just wander in to these factories and snatch some girl even if you are dressed as a ninja. They have security guards and cameras. Not to mention the fact that we’ve already got a police tail.’

‘Well, I’m not going in there wearing a summer dress.’

‘Don’t go in there at all is my advice.’

‘I have to, Simon. I promised. We’re the only hope she’s got.’

‘You’re doing the “we” thing again.’

Heavenly shakes her head in frustration, turns and enters the shop to pay for her ninja outfit.

I remain outside amongst the bales of clothing, keeping myself entertained by observing Red Dog a few shops back, pretending to tie his shoelaces for the third time.

Heavenly emerges wearing a black mandarin hat with a fake pigtail. She carries a brown paper bag ‘Here,’ she says, delving into the bag, ‘Didn’t want you to miss out.’ She produces another hat, identical to the one she’s wearing, a cheap shiny thing made of some kind of fake satin. It’s a horrible jokey tourist item and probably borderline racist but I put it on to keep her happy. She laughs.

We stroll back in companionable silence in our matching hats and pigtails, neither one of us willing to pick up the conversation at the risk of breaking the fragile detante. The smell wafting out from a hawker stall near the hotel reminds me that I haven’t eaten today and I’m ravenous. Enthusiastic gesticulation and a bit of emphatic pointing results in a couple of portions of quite appetizing takeaway noodles. Rather than lynching us for our hats we’re the focus of some good-natured laughter amongst the locals. Red Dog wanders past without turning his head, determined to demonstrate a distinct lack of interest in us, gaze firmly fixed on the pavement ahead as though on a mission to count the spit gobs. No doubt, relieved to be knocking off after a long and mostly thankless day.

Back in the room Heavenly suggests that I might want a quick shower; I can’t decide whether it’s because I’m a bit whiffy or if it’s a ploy to avoid the awkwardness of undressing. At any rate, by the time I’m done Heavenly has finished her noodles and is already tucked up in bed. I scuttle past, pink and glowing, with a towel round my waist. As I hop into my side of the bed I notice that my mandarin hat has been placed on a nearby chair. Beneath it is another neatly folded set of black trousers and black top. My size by the looks of things.

 ‘Just in case you change your mind,’ grins Heavenly.

I reach for my box of noodles. In bed, Heavenly taps away on her laptop.

‘What’re you doing?’ I ask.

‘Working on the plan,’ she replies.

The noodles are now cold and slightly congealed; I dig in with the disposable chopsticks and sigh.

**chpt**

It turns out that Heavenly likes to sleep on her front and I awake around six a.m. to find her out flung arm lying across my chest. As I attempt to disengage with all the delicacy of a bomb disposal specialist, I’m busted mid-maneuver when her eyes suddenly flick open.

 ‘Morning, Simon.’ she murmurs with a sleepy smile. ‘Bit early for wrestling …but if you insist…’ Writhing like an eel, her slim arm twists from my grip and burrows beneath the covers. I feel her tweeze the flesh above my waist before a rigid finger repeatedly drills me between the ribs. I scream and roll away, desperately seeking respite; I misjudge the width of the mattress and end up crashing to the floor. A fast-moving figure in my peripheral vision scoots towards the bathroom. ‘Ha. Bags first shower. Snooze you lose, loser.’

After a hurried buffet breakfast in the hotel we grab a cab on Baozhu Middle Road, which drops us at the Lucky Orchid factory in Jianshe Road at five minutes to seven. Wen is already outside, a little way back from the gates, nervously pacing back and forth like an expectant father.

 He bustles over at the sight of us, having regained some of his customary officiousness overnight. ‘Good morning, I am pleased to find you so punctual. The night shift is supposed to finish at seven a.m. though there may be some delay as there can often be extra work. Though it is too early for the presence of Red Dog, the guardhouse is occupied so we must take care not to make ourselves overly conspicuous here. ’

 ‘I have a map from the hotel,’ announces Heavenly. ‘We can pretend to be asking for directions.’

 ‘An excellent idea, Tin Tong,’ beams Wen.

 Heavenly duly produces a small map of the locality and we huddle. Wen makes a series of unconvincing pantomime gestures, pointing wildly in several different directions. If the guard on duty was not already aware of a couple of tourists suspiciously loitering outside the factory gates this deranged display of semaphore is sure to have aroused his curiosity.

 ‘Wen, can you just calm down, we’re actually attracting attention here.’

Heavenly’s right. Wen’s enthusiasm has sparked the interest of a couple of elderly passers-by. They address Wen, who sneers and shrugs before the three of them embark on an increasingly heated discussion.

‘What’s going on, Wen?’

‘I have explained to these busybodies that you seek a decent bakery in the vicinity. They wish to direct you to Nanji Bakery on Lize Street. That is laughable. Everyone knows that Caidiexuan Western Bakery is superior. I suspect they have a family connection to the Nanji Bakery and I have said as much. They are not being entirely honest with you, Tin Tong.’ With that, Wen resumes the argument with what, judging by the level of affront, appear to be a series of highly personal attacks on the couple’s integrity.

It seems that the people hereabouts are quite partial to an early-morning set-to as more of the passing locals descend on us, quickly dividing into two highly partisan and passionately shouty camps. Our discreet map-reading ploy has now descended into what can only be described as a full-scale ruckus.

As it happens, Wen couldn’t have planned it better. While the commotion rages I am tapped lightly on the shoulder by a slender, serious-looking, buck-toothed woman in her late twenties. She wears the typical loose drawstring trousers and short-sleeved shirt of a factory worker. ‘Good day,’ she says, ‘my name is Morning Star. My cousin has informed me that you wish to speak with me.’

‘Morning Star. Yes, how are you?’ I say, delighted to find that Wen’s dubious services are surplus to requirements here.

‘I am in good health, thank you for asking.’

‘My name is Simon and this is my friend, Heavenly. Thank you for meeting with us. And your English is excellent.’

She smiles vaguely, we shake hands. I notice she has long, fragile fingers, which are red and calloused, no doubt from the cutting work. Behind her a small stream of night shift workers emerge from the factory gates, heads down, shuffling with fatigue. They halt, lean against a sunlit patch of the factory wall and light up.

‘I enjoy speaking English but conversing with foreigners is not encouraged, perhaps we might walk a little, away from the guardhouse would be preferable.’

‘Of course,’ says Heavenly. ‘We understand and we’re very grateful for your time.’

‘I cannot speak for long, I must return to my dormitory to eat and then sleep.’

We stroll slowly away from the on going dispute, following the wall surrounding the factory. The building itself is an unexceptional rectangular off-white block with a series of small square windows along each of the three floors. Much of the paint is flaking and the occasional air conditioning unit underscored by brown water stains oozing down the wall like ancient drool.

We turn a corner out of sight of the guardhouse and slow to a halt.

‘My cousin has informed me that you purchased buns.’

‘Yes, we bought her buns and Coke.’

‘My cousin enjoys buns.’

‘Yeah, we got that. Look, we’d be happy to get you some buns.’

‘I do not require buns. If I did I would certainly obtain them from the Nanji Bakery.’ I can’t be sure but I think Morning Star has just made a joke. She doesn’t smile but simply waits for one of us to break the silence.

‘Is there anything else we can offer you?’ asks Heavenly.

‘We are paid very little for our work at the factory,’ Morning Star responds bluntly.

‘I see,’ says Heavenly reaching into shorts pocket for her Yuan and peels off a red one hundred note. ‘Would this be sufficient? For your time?’

Morning Star pockets it with only the slightest inclination of her head. ‘Thank you, that would be most sufficient.’ Her hand emerges from the pocket clasping a packet of cigarettes and a cheap pink lighter. Without offering them she extracts a single cigarette from a gold packet with the words “Double Happiness” picked out in red. With her severe and joyless demeanour, she doesn’t strike me as any kind of an addict but she lights up and inhales deeply, with obvious pleasure.

‘So, have you worked at the factory for long?’

‘Since I was seventeen years old. I am now twenty-seven. I began as an unskilled worker but now I am a senior level employee. If I am careful not to displease the bosses, in a few years I expect to be made a supervisor.’

 ‘Then you must know a worker here named Precious Jade?’

 Morning Star purses her lips in disapproval before taking another deep drag. ‘There are over four hundred workers at the factory, but, yes, I know this one. She is an entry-level worker, more or less unskilled. I believe she has been here for nearly a year now. She is a frivolous person and has often been criticised for failing to work sufficiently hard. She has been put into Double-Death with four other miscreants.’

 Heavenly goggles, ‘I don’t understand, what does that mean, “put into Double-Death”? You can’t mean put *to* death, surely?’

 Morning Star exhales, smiling thinly. ‘Dormitory Four-Four, Double-Death. This signifies the fourth room on the fourth floor of the main dormitory block. Four is an unlucky number for us. In Cantonese the word for four sounds very like the word for death. Any room numbered with a four is considered most inauspicious. Poorly behaved or lazy workers are put into rooms with the number four. As you can see room Four-Four is doubly unfortunate.’

‘That’s just mean.’

 Morning Star releases a great stream of blue smoke from both nostrils. ‘It is how life is in the factories. The best workers are given rooms numbered with eights. Eight is very lucky.’

 ‘How come?’

 ‘Eight sounds like our word for money. My dormitory is One-Eight. And look, I have received an extra one hundred Yuan today. Lucky me.’

 Heavenly frowns, ‘Yes, lucky you, Morning Star. What will happen to Precious Jade?’

Morning Star takes another giant puff. ‘She will remain in the unlucky dormitory with the other scoundrels and troublemakers until she is able to conform better to the rules. Or until something unfortunate occurs.’

‘Such as actual double death?’

Morning Star shrugs. ‘It is possible. There are many accidents in the factories.’

‘Can we speak to her?’

‘I do not think that is likely. Besides, she cannot speak English.’

‘Poor girl, she must be very unhappy.’

 ‘I do not understand your concern. You do not know this person, why should you care? We are all here to work. What does happiness have to do with anything?’

 I can see that Heavenly is becoming frustrated with the conversation. ‘Listen, Morning Star. I want you to be honest with me, is Precious Jade being held against her…’

 Morning Star abruptly drops her cigarette and stamps it out on the pavement. ‘Excuse me,’ she hisses, ‘I must leave. The gentleman approaching is one of the supervisors. I cannot be seen with you.’ With that, she scurries away, heading back towards the factory gates.

 ‘Well fuck them and their double-shit factory,’ announces Heavenly. ‘I am definitely getting her out.’

 ‘Oh, come on, Heavenly. We’ve found out about conditions in the factories. Precious Jade is real, she exists, we’ve confirmed that. It’s enough. We need to think about going home.’

 ‘It’s not enough. I have to try to get her out.’

‘Why? It’s just a dormitory with an unlucky number. No big deal. We had the same thing at my boarding school. All the dormitories had the names of birds of prey: Eagle, Osprey, Hawk, Upper and Lower Kestrel, Vulture and Sparrow.’

‘Sparrow’s not a bird of prey.’

‘It’s where they put all the nerds.’

Heavenly laughs. ‘That explains a lot.’ She appraises me for a moment. ‘I know what you’re trying to do, Simon, and it won’t work. I’m going ahead with it tonight.’

I shake my head. ‘It’s a ridiculous risk, and for what?’

‘This is slavery, Simon, pure and simple whichever way you look at it.’

‘Precious Jade is getting paid. Maybe not a lot by our standards but she earns money.’

‘It’s economic slavery. She’s not free to leave; they say they’re paying these people but they withhold the money; you heard Little Plum. That’s coercion. I’m getting her out and that’s final.’

I’ve run out of arguments and, in any case in my experience, there’s never any mileage in arguing with Heavenly. I look away, seeking inspiration, staring up the road as an elderly woman shuffles towards us holding the hand of a chubby toddler in a faded yellow romper suit. It’s a serene image, the two of them hand in hand, generations apart, connected by the simple joys of a stroll in the morning sun. The toddler tugs at his grandmother’s arm, she bends to adjust his outfit; the child squats, revealing his bare buttocks through the open slit in the backside of his suit and defecates onto the pavement.

I have a feeling that this might be a metaphor, or an omen, or something.

‘There is good news and bad news. The good news is that I have prevailed in the debate regarding the merits of the Caidiexuan Western Bakery. There is no further disagreement as to where you should purchase your buns, Tin Tong. The bad news is that there has been no sign of Morning Star.’

 As far as I’m concerned, the bad news is that Wen’s caught up with us. He seems remarkably pleased with himself as he joins us, hands clasped behind his back, a smug grin on his face.

 ‘Wen, we’ve spoken with Morning Star. She’s come and gone.’

 ‘How is that possible?’

 ‘While you were arguing the merits of your buns, we met with Morning Star. She speaks good English.’

 ‘*Your* buns, Tin Tong,’ corrects Wen. ‘And what of this Precious Jade?’

 ‘She works here but she’s on the day shift. We haven’t been able to speak with her.’

 Wen shrugs, ‘These people are all the same. Speak with any of them, they will complain and bemoan their lot, they will all tell you the same things.’

 ‘You’re right, Wen, there’s no real story here.’

 ‘You have come to my country looking for information about the terrible conditions in our factories, about how the people are mistreated and oppressed? You have been searching in the wrong place.’

 ‘How so?’

 ‘You want to know why these people are paid so little for their work? Who is at fault? The supervisors? The bosses? The government?’

 ‘Yes, Wen, we do. That’s why we’re here.’

 ‘Then you should have remained at home. You are the ones at fault. You, Simon, your neighbours, your friends all of you. It is your appetite for cheap clothing and goods that is the real cause of these hardships.’

 ‘We know that. That’s why people are beginning to boycott these goods. I don’t have all the answers, Wen, I only know that we have to do something. One person can sometimes make a difference. Like a lever in the right place.’

 Wen grimaces, ‘I am an engineer it is not necessary to explain the workings of levers to me.’

 Heavenly reaches into her pocket for her bundle of cash. She peels off a five hundred note with a picture of smiling old buffer on it along with a red one hundred. ‘Three hundred a day I think we agreed.’

 Wen inclines his head and trousers the cash. ‘Very well, Tin Tong, I am only sorry that we were not able to get to know one another better. What are your intentions now?’

 ‘Home, Wen. We’re going home.’

 Wen smiles thinly, turns and ambles away without looking back.

 Heavenly observes him with a disapproving frown. ‘I don’t trust him, Simon.’

 ‘He’s just being a smartarse. To be fair, he does have a point.’

 ‘Yeah, well, if he’s so smart, how come he’s just trodden in toddler shit?’

It’s one-thirty a.m. and I’m gazing at my reflection in our room’s full-length mirror. It’s not an inspiring sight since I resemble a walk-on in an under-funded pantomime. Heavenly is attempting to stifle a laugh, but frankly, doesn’t look much better herself.

 We’re both dressed in those shapeless black trousers and tops of hers; her blonde bob is more or less concealed, tucked up inside her black mandarin hat, which she’s fixed in place with a couple of hairpins. I don’t actually require mine since my hair is already dark but Heavenly has insisted I wear it for reasons of solidarity. The finishing touch is a tin of boot polish which will serve to blacken our faces.

 I finally agreed to go on this hare-brained rescue mission and, although I can see a hundred different flaws in the plan, I’m reasonably relaxed and philosophical. This is because I took a Lexotan about half an hour ago and I’ve just knocked back a couple of large measures of Baijiu, the local white spirit. It’s foul and I’ll probably use it to remove the boot polish if we ever return, but it seems to have done the trick.

The clincher for me was Heavenly’s entirely unassailable observation that if she’s caught in the act, they’ll certainly come and arrest me too.

 ‘Leave the polish ‘til we’re outside the gates,’ advises Heavenly. ‘Don’t want to look like we’re up to no good.’

 ‘We are up to no good.’

 ‘No, we’re up to some good. This is a good thing we’re doing.’ Her phone pings, heralding the receipt of a text. ‘That’s our friendly fisherman standing by. All fine so far. Now, I just need to make one final check and we’re good to go.’ She speed dials a number, waits a few moment or two for the connection. ‘I haven’t told you about this bit. You’re gonna like it,’ she says with a grin before speaking into the mobile. ‘Hi, it’s me. All set? Good.’ She grins before offering me the handset. ‘Old friend of yours,’ she explains.

 ‘Hello,’ I say uncertainly. ‘Who’s this?’

 ‘Hello, mate. How’s it going?’ The line is surprisingly clear.

‘Valentine.’

‘At your service, my old china.’

 ‘Look, whatever it is you want, this is not a good time. We’re a little bit busy right now…’

‘The Priceless Jewel hoist. I know, mate.’

‘Precious Jade. A person not a thing.’

‘Priceless Jewel sounds better. More of a smash and grab vibe.’

‘Why am I having this conversation with you, Valentine?’

‘’Cos I’m on the team, Simon. Heavenly’s the good-looking mastermind, me and Bruce are the wise-cracking tech geniuses, you’re the loveable idiot.’

‘Who’s Bruce?’

‘Bruce Lee. Mate of mine. Say hello to Simon, Bruce.’

 I hear Bruce’s voice in the background. ‘Nie hau,’ he says.

‘Bruce is helping me out with the Chinese stuff. Not his real name of course. His real name’s Jackie. Jackie Chan.’

‘Very amusing, Valentine, but what are you supposed to be doing?’

‘We’re creating a distraction.’

‘That’s true.’

‘In about twenty minutes we’re gonna be switching the cameras off for you.’

‘How? You’re not even here?’

‘Come on Simon, you know me better than that. The factory system’s all run from a central server. If it’s connected, I can get into it. The Chinese characters were a bit tricky but that’s what Jackie Chan’s for.’

‘Why are you doing this?’

‘I dunno. A laugh, I suppose.’

‘Not for me it’s not.’

‘Don’t sweat it. It’s gonna be a doddle. Try and keep it together, mate.’

Valentine cuts the connection. I hand the phone back to Heavenly who attaches an earpiece before putting safely into the pocket of her black trousers. ‘Well, that was unexpected,’ I say.

‘Not really. Valentine’s been helping me with my website. He likes what we’re trying to do.’

‘He said he’s doing it for a laugh.’

She smiles. ‘You know what he’s like, that’s just him being Jack the Lad. He loves the challenge but I think he does genuinely want to help. Oh, and his real name’s Peter.’

‘How would you even know that?’

‘We’ve been in touch over the past few weeks. You know, emailing and so on. He’s a sweet boy underneath all that stupid hacker nonsense.’

‘You trust him then?’

‘I trust you, don’t I?’

Road traffic is thin and sporadic but the pavements are still quite active when we leave the hotel. Brightly coloured signs for the cafes and bars remain illuminated and small groups of drinkers sit outside these establishments enjoying the warm night air. We manage to flag down a taxi on Baozhu Middle Road in short order. Some ten minutes later we’re deposited around the corner from the factory entrance at the top of Dade Road. Heavenly waits for the taxi to disappear before producing her little tin of boot polish. We dig in and blacken our faces, carefully touching up the bare patches for each other. It’s a curiously intimate moment, anyone passing might see two lovers standing close, caressing one another’s cheeks with their fingertips. We’re so close I can feel her breath on my skin. It’s sweet with overtones of the strong Baijiu spirit. My head slowly inches towards hers, I close my eyes, lulled by a benzodiazapine and alcohol infusion of calm and wellbeing .

A moist finger drills my earhole. ‘Oy, get with it, Simon,’ she orders, withdrawing her finger. She licks her lips and spits, ‘Ugh, boot polish. Serves me right for licking my finger.’

I jerk my head away, wrenched back to the terrifying reality of what we are about to attempt. ‘Right. So now what?’

‘First, we get as close as we can to the gatehouse. I send Peter a text and he deactivates the external security camera. With any luck the guard will come out to investigate, then we slip in.’

‘That’s it?’

‘I let Peter know we’re safely in and he deactivates the rest of the cameras. We find Precious Jade, grab her and get the hell out.’

‘We just grab her and leg it?’

‘Obviously we hand her the phone first so Bruce can explain who we are.’

‘What if she doesn’t want to come with us?’

‘Course she wants to come. Who wouldn’t, working all the hours God sends, locked up the rest of the time in a shitty double-death dormitory? That’s why she wrote the note. She’s desperate, Simon. It’s the one thing I’m sure of in all this. You’re just seeing problems where there aren’t any.’

‘I can think of so many things that could go wrong it’s hard to know where to begin.’

‘We need to get going, Simon. Otherwise it’ll be dawn by the time you finish fussing.’

Heavenly turns and heads off down the poorly lit Jianshe road, fake pigtail flying as she breaks into a trot to cover the remaining five hundred yards or so to the factory itself. In a few minutes we find ourselves hunched in the shadow of the high brick wall surrounding the factory, almost the exact same spot where we spoke with Morning Star this morning.

 ‘Ok, so how are we going to get back out?’

‘Ssshh,’ Heavenly puts a finger to her lips. ‘Keep your voice down.’

‘How do we get out?’ I insist in a whisper.

‘Peter’s going to create a distraction for us.’

‘What sort of distraction?’

‘Can you just shut up now, Simon, I’m giving the Peter the signal,’ she hisses, thumbing the buttons on her phone. ‘More ninja, less whinger please.’ I see her wide, white-toothed grin in the darkness. She’s deluded; there’s nothing remotely ninja about these ridiculous outfits. Whilst I have no desire to be arrested, obviously, I especially don’t want to be arrested looking like Aladdin and Mrs Wishy Washy.

Heavenly scuttles away, careful to remain in the shadows. I dutifully follow as she reaches the corner, where she crouches. We peer cautiously around the edge of the wall to see, ahead of us, a loading area with a couple of vans parked up on the tarmac apron. There’s no actual gate as such, just a red and white striped security barrier operated from the guardhouse, which is a narrow portacabin affair with space for no more than one or two persons at a time. The loading area is overlooked by a single pole-mounted security camera linked to an industrial sodium lamp.

We remain crouched there for what seems like an eternity; my legs are beginning to cramp just as the sodium lamp blinks off.

‘Bingo,’ breathes Heavenly.

About a minute later a uniformed guard emerges from the gatehouse and shuffles over to the camera pole. There’s no sign of alarm or urgency in his movements and he does exactly what most normal people do when faced with a baffling technical fault: places his hands on his hips, glares up at the malfunctioning camera and kicks the pole. When that fails he bends down and embarks on a bit of random fiddling with the wires.

 While the guard’s back is turned we dart across to the nearest van using it as a screen. A quick peek from the rear confirms that the guard is still busy messing with the wires, so we’re good to go. We cover the final few yards to the gatehouse at a silent sprint, skid around the security pole and we’re safely in.

 Looming over us, silhouetted against the night sky are two austere square blocks connected by a single entrance in the form of a concrete portico. Lights illuminate the windows of the right hand structure indicating that this is the factory floor where the night shift are hard at work. The structure to the left, on the other hand, is silent and shrouded in darkness. We glide into the relative darkness of the portico and quickly locate a concrete stairway to our left. I imagine that sleep is precious to the day shift workers so the stairways and corridors are deserted and silent. We ascend four flights of stairs, halting on the final landing to catch our breath and allow Heavenly to activate the inbuilt torch on her phone.

From here we make our way down the pitch black corridor navigating by smartphone torchlight. It’s narrow and spooky, like something out of a shoot-em-up game. We take care to check each door as we pass until we find the one marked with the infamous double sei symbol denoting room four, fourth floor.

Heavenly thumbs the buttons on her phone and listens intently for a connection through her earpiece. ‘Hi,’ she whispers, ‘It’s me. Put Bruce on. We’ve found the room; we’re about to go in.’

She turns off the torch mode then nods, giving me the thumbs up. I turn the door handle very slowly; the door creaks a little as I inch it open. Like the corridor, the room is dark but my night vision has kicked in and I can discern a narrow space with four beds arranged against the walls, two to each side. We creep across the threshold and I gently close the door behind us. The air inside is stale and smells vaguely of cabbage; one of the occupants snores like a cartoon dog.

‘Bao Yuk,’ Bruce’s sing-song voice emerges from the phone’s speaker. ‘Bao Yuk,’ he calls softly.

I’m conscious of movement from the nearest bed. A muffled figure stirs beneath the covers.

Heavenly steps towards the bed holding up the phone. ‘Bao Yuk,’ croons Bruce. Abruptly, the figure in the bed comes upright.

‘One of them’s awake,’ whispers Heavenly briefly into the phone before holding it out once again. Bruce’s voice emerges speaking slowly and calmly in Cantonese. The occupant of the bed nods and replies in a groggy voice.

‘It’s her,’ confirms Bruce, ‘she says her name is Precious Jade.’

‘Tell her we’ve come to rescue her. Tell her we need her to come with us, right now,’ responds Heavenly before directing the phone at Precious Jade. As Bruce’s voice chatters quietly away through the speaker I notice that the other occupants are beginning to stir. Across the room one of them props herself up. ‘We need to hurry,’ I whisper, ‘the others are waking up.’

Precious Jade replies to Bruce’s words, not surprisingly, she sounds terrified, it’s a lengthy response and even in the dark I can see her shaking her head emphatically.

‘Shit,’ I say, ‘this is not good.’

Bruce translates for us over the speaker: ‘Precious Jade doesn’t want to go anywhere. She says she has to work in the morning. The note was only for fun because she was bored. Her friends sent notes too but they never expected anyone to reply. She says thank you for coming but she must get back to sleep now or she will be in trouble.’

‘For fuck’s sake,’ hisses Heavenly.

‘We need to go,’ I urge.

‘No,’ insists Heavenly, ‘she’s just scared and no wonder. It’s pitch black and there are two intruders in her room. She needs to see us.’ With that, she activates the torch mode on her phone illuminating her face.

Precious Jade screams.

To be fair, in the harsh white light of the beam Heavenly’s disembodied shining black face under the weird hat does resemble something out of a Japanese horror film. ‘My name is Heavenly. We mean no harm. We’re friends,’ she soothes. ‘This is Simon.’ She compounds the nightmare by pointing the beam up at me.

The girl screams even louder. The rest of the dormitory is now fully awake, all adding their terrified shrieks to the cacophony.

‘Mogwai,’ screeches Precious Jade hysterically before burrowing under her covers.

I put my finger to my lips ‘Shhh,’ I exhort. This seems to make matters worse. If anything the screaming increases in volume. The other girls pick up on the Mogwai theme whilst one of them appears to be having some kind of fit, violently thrashing about on her bed.

‘Shit. Run, Simon,’ orders Heavenly. ‘We need that distraction, now, guys,’ she yells into her phone as the two of us pile out of the door. The corridor is still pitch black but we can make out shadowy, huddled groups of frightened young girls beginning to congregate outside the other dormitories, no doubt alerted by the screams. We charge past them, heading for the stairwell. The figures yelp and disperse as we barge our way through. We hit the stairs running; luckily the commotion has yet to spread to the lower floors and so the stairway is empty. We arrive at the ground floor breathing hard and run through the portico back out into the open air. I’m about to make for the gatehouse when Heavenly grabs my shirt. ‘No. You’ll run straight into the guards. This way,’ she orders, heading left.

We sprint around the front of the dormitory block conscious of the lights flicking on at every floor as the sleeping workers are roused by the uproar. We turn at the corner of the block and head down the side of the building towards the rear of the factory complex. I’m starting to hear urgent voices behind us now and can see the beams of high-powered torches sweeping across the night sky.

At the end of the block our progress is blocked by another large structure. We quickly locate the entrance in the weak moonlight and thankfully, the door is not locked. The room is completely dark but Heavenly charges straight in. I follow and manage to cover about two yards before my forehead meets an immovable object with a monumental clang.

I stagger backwards and it takes a moment or so for the pain to kick in. ‘Fuck,’ I bellow, forgetting the need for stealth.

Heavenly activates her phone’s torch mode, directing the beam at my face. ‘You all right?’

‘No, I’m not bloody all right. I just ran headfirst into a steel girder or something.’ I hold my head in both hands, terrified that my brain might be about to fall out.

As she plays the beam around we can see that we’re in a huge storeroom, a maze of high metal shelving units containing cardboard boxes of all sizes. Scattered all around are giant bales of cotton and denim which are stacked floor to ceiling. A few of the cardboard boxes have split to disgorge great streams of sparkling buttons and jewelled fixings resembling a dragon’s hoard.

It’s one of those high metal shelves that I’ve run into, of course; there’s now a black smear of boot polish on the edge where I connected. Heavenly, being a good deal shorter manged to run straight underneath and is completely unscathed, naturally. ‘Man runs into a bar,’ she says.

‘What?’

‘It was an iron bar.’

‘For fuck’s sake, how are you making jokes at a time like this?’ I take my hands from my forehead. ‘How is it? Can you see my brain?’

‘No, but it is bleeding.’

There’s a small bale of embroidered white fabric close by. Heavenly quickly unravels a section and rips it away with her teeth. She stretches up and uses it to dab at the blood. ‘Here. Keep it pressed against your head for as long as you can.’

She directs her beam to the far wall where we can see two huge doors. ‘That must be the rear delivery bay,’ she announces. ‘If we can get the doors open, it’s our way out.’

We’ve just negotiated the second row of bales and shelves when the entire place lights up. We instantly drop to a crouch and take cover behind a huge bale of denim. We can hear at least two male voices chattering away. I peer round the bale to see that it’s a couple of the uniformed security guards. They begin to search the room, slowly pacing around the rows of shelves, being certain to check behind each of the giant bales. At the rate they’re going they’ll be on us in about forty seconds.

‘We’re done for,’ I whisper.

‘Maybe. Maybe not,’ replies Heavenly, cryptically.

The lead guard is now at the bale of white fabric. He stoops to examine it, I wonder if I’ve left a blood trail on the concrete floor. He rises and scans the room suspiciously.

A klaxon suddenly blares, startling us all. It’s an urgent repeated wail echoing painfully around this huge space. The two guards call out to each other in a panicked tones. The guard nearest us points in our direction, evidently keen to continue the search. He’s bluntly overruled by his companion, an older man, and clearly his superior. The senior guard rattles off a series of instructions and the pair sprint for the door.

‘Like I said, maybe not,’ whispers Heavenly. ‘That’s our distraction.’

‘An intruder alert?’

‘Fire alarm.’

We wait about thirty seconds to be sure that the guards are really gone before getting back to our feet. With all the lights on it’s a simple matter to bypass the rows of shelving and make it safely to the double doors at the rear. They’re large and heavy, sizeable enough to allow lorries to back in with their deliveries. The good news though, is that they’re secured from the inside with sliding bolts. I’m reasonably certain that the worst of the bleeding has stopped for the moment so I shove the white cloth into my pocket using both hands to heave at the left hand bolt, which is stiff and squeals shrilly as it comes loose, but silence is no longer an issue with the constant blaring of the klaxon. We haul open the door, check that the coast is clear and race out into the deserted street where we continue at the trot, keen to put as much distance between ourselves and the blaring factory as possible.

A few hundred yards further on we halt on a piece of waste ground to collect ourselves. ‘Well, that could have gone better,’ I say, trying to catch my breath.

‘You think?’

Heavenly inspects my forehead, pressing gently with her fingers. ‘There’s a bit of an egg but the cut’s tiny. You’ll survive,’ she announces, thumbing her phone screen.

‘You all right there?’ Valentine’s voice comes through loud and clear over the speaker.

‘You took your time. They nearly had us,’ objects Heavenly.

‘Sorry, took us a few minutes to override the system. It all went tits-up over there so quick.’

‘That’s an understatement. Precious Jade was meant to be happy to see us, for Christ’s sake.’

‘Bruce says it’s because she thought you were the Mogwai.’

‘That’s a fucking gremlin. What’s that got to do with anything?’

‘The Mogwai is a Chinese hell-demon. They thought you’d come to take them to hell.’

‘Or worse, Newbury,’ I add.

Heavenly is not amused. ‘Fuck. I actually think one of them might have pissed the bed.’

‘Nice one,’ replies Valentine. Heavenly closes the connection.

‘It’s time we went home,’ I announce.

‘Fine,’grimaces the Mogwai, ‘just don’t say “I told you so”.

**Chpt**

We decide not to try to flag down a taxi given the state of us and the knowledge that a good many of the drivers are police informers. After a few wrong turns we arrive back at the hotel just as dawn is breaking, tired and footsore.

The young night receptionist gives us an odd look and is unable to meet my eye as we pass; this I attribute to our eccentrically disshevilled appearance. Once upstairs, I slip the card into the lock fully intending to collapse onto the bed and sleep until lunchtime.

I’m confused.

There’s a young man in a well-fitted dark suit and tie lounging back in our single armchair. I’m about to apologise, thinking that we’ve somehow managed to barge in on the wrong room, before I spot our rucksacks, which have been emptied out. Similarly, the drawers and cupboards have been turned out and our clothes lie scattered about the place. The young man inclines his head, ‘Mr Collins, Miss Holmes, good morning.’

‘What the fuck have you been doing with our stuff?’ snarls Heavenly.

The young man smiles. ‘How was your night?’

‘None of your business.’

‘You are wrong, Miss Holmes.’ He steeples his fingers, ‘But first, my name is Mr Li. It is a pleasure to meet you.’

Behind me I hear the toilet flush, a beaming Wen emerges from our bathroom. ‘Tin Tong, Simon, how are you? I have good news.’

‘What’s going on, Wen?’

‘The prefecture has kindly agreed to allow me to practice engineering. Excellent news is it not?’

‘Bully for you, Wen. Why are you in our room?’

‘Mr Li is here to ask you some questions. I have been asked to confirm the truth of your statements.’

Mr Li nods, ‘I am chief of the local Public Security Bureau. We have some concerns regarding your activities here.’

‘We’ve done nothing wrong,’ insists Heavenly.

‘Then might I ask why are you dressed in such…outlandish costumes?’

Streaks of sweat aside, Heavenly’s face is still more or less covered in black boot polish. Her pigtailed hat remains firmly pinned in place. Mine is long gone, probably sent flying when I cracked my head.

‘Fancy dress party,’ replies Heavenly.

Mr Li chuckles. ‘I like that. Very good, Miss Holmes. But surely, blacking the face is no longer considered quite correct in your country? And the mandarin hat? What on earth can you be dressed as?’

‘The Mogwai.’

Mr Li laughs, vastly amused. ‘Excellent. This demonstrates a true understanding of my country’s cultural history, if not much sensitivity.’

‘Well, it’s hardly illegal, is it?’

‘No, a blackened face and an unusual costume is not unlawful in the People’s Republic.’

Heavenly smiles for the first time.

‘However, breaking into one of our factories is certainly an offence. A very serious one.’

‘I have no idea what you’re talking about.’

Mr Li fastidiously straightens a crease in one of his trouser legs. ‘I thought perhaps not. Would it help if I told you that you were followed from your hotel this evening, not by the gentleman you so amusingly refer to as the Red Dog, but by two of our more, shall we say, capable officers?’

‘There must be some mistake.’

‘I think not. Wen Chen here is able to confirm your earlier interest in the factory that the two of you unlawfully entered tonight.’

Heavenly’s stoic defence crumbles. ‘You fucker, Wen.’

‘I apologise, Tin Tong; but surely you are happy that I have been permitted to resume my profession, as I deserve?’

‘You deserve a kick in the balls.’

Mr Li tuts, ‘Wen Chen is simply being a good citizen. His first concern must always be to the People’s Republic. Also, your threat is most unfeminine.’ Mr Li inpects his watch, which I notice is an expensive Breitling. ‘Now, it is time for us to leave.’

‘Good. Have a nice day,’ says Heavenly.

‘I’m afraid you will both be coming with us, Miss Holmes.’

‘Why?’

‘Because you are under arrest of course.’ Mr Li barks something in Cantonese. The door swings open and four uniformed policemen enter. ‘You are being taken to the Guangdong Provincial Public Security Department in Guangzhou to be questioned.’ Mr Li indicates the contents of our room with a sweeping gesture. ‘Do not concern yourselves about your property it will be quite safe; there is no theft in the People’s Republic. However, your computers will be confiscated and examined. I shall also require your mobile phone, Miss Holmes.’ He extends a hand. Heavenly sighs, digs into her pocket and hands over her smartphone. One of the uniforms gathers up our laptops.

‘Can we at least have a shower and get changed?’

‘No. Your appearance is evidence of your culpability. There is an English idiom, I believe: you have made your own bed and now you must go to bed.’

‘Lie.’

‘No, it is perfectly true. There is no lying in the People’s Republic.’ Mr Li snaps an order, our arms are roughly pinioned, wrenched behind our backs and cuffed. We’re hastily patted down before being frogmarched out of the room. As we pass, Heavenly launches a swift kick at the smugly grinning Wen. It’s beautifully timed and she catches him right in the nuts and he rises about a foot into the air. A perfect demonstration of the lever principle.

**Chpt**

We’re bundled unceremoniously into a blue and white police van, a uniformed flunky sitting between us, the other three climb into the row behind. Any attempt at communication is discouraged by a shrap rap on the back of the head and a warning wave of the finger. Mr Li hops into the front, nods to the driver and we’re away.

It’s about an hour and a quarter, even with the lights flashing and sirens blaring before we arrive at our destination, a squat, slightly sinister, modernist block. We are hustled through the entrance at high speed. Heavenly, objecting furiously, is passed into the custody of two grim female officers, while I am propelled by the uniformed policemen down a brightly lit corridor. I’m uncuffed and shoved into a holding cell.

 The door clangs behind me emphatically. The cell is a smooth walled holding tank with a concrete bench abutting from the far wall. It’s utterly featureless with the exception of the Chinese graffiti scratched into the pale green gloss. I’m extremely thirsty yet, paradoxically, busting for a pee. I’m not expecting room service any time soon but there is a single smelly, horrifically soiled hole in one corner of the concrete floor, which I use to relieve myself.

 I drop onto the bench and, with nothing else to occupy me, consider our predicament. I’m anxious as usual, but to my surprise I find I’m not so fearful for myself. I’m more concerned about Heavenly. On the one hand, Heavenly has always been able to handle herself, but on the other, I worry that she’ll end up doing something crazy. I’m no expert in the Chinese judicial system but one of the things I do know is that people who annoy the ones in charge have a nasty habit of disappearing. Usually, helped on their way with a bullet to the back of the neck.

 The problem is, I can’t tell how serious this whole thing is.

 We sneaked into a factory and scared the crap out of a few teenage girls but, apart from my skull, we didn’t break anything. Neither did we steal, set fire to, or sabotage anything. At worst, it’s trespass, which isn’t even a criminal offence in the UK. So, it’s not that serious. It can’t be. Unless they consider it to be burglary, which is deadly serious.

I’m also wondering what they’ll make of the disguise thing. They might decide, as Mr Li says, that this is evidence of our culpability, but then again, no self-respecting burglar would choose to look so idiotic. Of course, they might consider the costumes to be a cunning double-bluff. That one could go either way.

My mind is still running round in circles when the door is unlocked. A couple of uniformed policemen usher me out. They secure an arm each, hurry me through a series of corridors and up a set of stairs before we arrive outside a plain rosewood door. One of them knocks. We enter an impressively large office, carpeted in a vast sea of pristine white wool. A stout individual in a pin-stripe suit with slicked back hair sits behind a gigantic desk at the far end of the room in a classic black leather and chrome chair. I notice that he has our laptops and phones before him.

‘Mr Collins, please come in and be seated,’ the pin-stripe suit urges, flapping a pudgy hand. I’m manhandled into a plain wooden chair facing him. He waves vaguely in the direction of the policemen, who snap off quick salutes before leaving the room.

‘My name is Hao Dingxian. You may address me as Mr Hao. My role is to protect the security of our industry in this region. Mr Li you already know.’ He indicates Li who is leaning against the wall to my left.

‘It seems that you and your companion have an interest in our factories, Mr Collins.’

‘There’s been a misunderstanding, that’s all. Your English is very good, if I may say so.’

Mr Hao remains impassive but there is a chuckle from the right hand side of the room. I look across to see the figure of a child seated at one end of a black leather sofa. On further inspection I realise that it’s not a child at all but a dwarf. At least I think it’s a dwarf, it could be a midget; I’ve never been entirely clear on the rules. At any rate, a vertically-challenged person, short but compact and solid-looking with a mean, squished up face, not at all improved by the malicious grin he gives me.

I look away, returning my gaze to Mr Hao. Despite the residual Lexotan still sloshing around in my system, I’m beginning to sweat and can feel the furnace heat suffusing my face beneath the greasy mask of boot polish. I’m blushing furiously but, for the moment, I think I’m able to convey an impression of baffled innocence. I make an effort to slow my breathing and recall Heavenly’s advice: Stop being afraid all the time; be bold and mighty forces will come to your aid; and finally, try to imagine them on the toilet.

Mr Hao is fat and pale so that’s not a pretty thought. Also, he looks like he might be troubled by constipation.

‘That you and your companion broke into the Lucky Orchid garment factory last night is not in question. We would like to know your purpose, Mr Collins.’

‘I’m sorry, it was just a silly prank, a dare.’

Mr Hao grunts, grimaces and leans forward across the desk, straining. This is helpful in respect of the visualization process but also rather off-putting. ‘We know from Mr Li’s investigations that you are journalists, here to gather information on the People’s Republic.’

‘No, that’s not the case. I’m just a humble marketing consultant.’

‘That is not our understanding. Your purpose here is to smear the People’s Republic with your lies. Our industries and economy are under attack from certain influencial parties in the West and must be protected at all costs.’

‘No, we just…’

‘Who sent you to smear us, Mr Collins?’

‘No one.’

‘I will not permit the People’s Republic to be smeared.’

I really wish Mr Hao would stop with all the smearing as I’m beginning to feel a bit queasy.

‘We’ve done no harm. We just want to go home.’

‘On the contrary, Mr Collins. You have committed industrial espionage and will be made an example of.’

‘Industrial espionage?’

‘Spying. You are spies and will be punished accordingly.’

My stomarch lurches violently. I haven’t eaten since last evening but a thin stream of watery vomit erupts from my mouth. I stare down with horror at the small pool sinking into the lush woolen pile at my feet.

The dwarf cackles.

Mr Hao says something to him, the dwarf rises, gives him a brief bow and waddles out of the room, leering meaningfully at me as he passes.

‘I wipe my hands of you, Mr Collins.’

I decide to dispense with Heavenly’s visualization technique. It’s not helping.

‘I have been patient, but you have not been co-operative. I have tried to be civilized with you and, in return, you have smeared my carpet. My patience is at an end.’ He barks an order in chinese, instantly the office door opens, the same pair of policemen enter the room and await orders. ‘We have effective methods of uncovering the truth and sooner or later you will confess. I will not stand by while our economic powerhouse is undermined by the West.’

I had imagined that the very worst that could happen would be a few days in the cells and a slap on the wrist while some low-level functionary at the foreign office puts a bit of pressure on for us to be released. But I’m genuinely terrified now, literally puking with fear.

Ordinarily, any form of anxiety sends me into a spin, freezing my brain and paralysing rational thought. But this is way beyond. Something primal. Fear for my own skin, of course, but more particularly, terror at the thought of Heavenly, brutalized, tortured, ending up with a bullet in the back of the neck. I can only imagine that it’s the huge spike of adrenalin, which lends an unexpected speed and clarity to my cognitive process, out of which emerges an instant and glorious epiphany: if I’m any kind of an agent then I’m a double agent. I realise that my work for Tony and his horrible client might actually save us.

The policemen advance, one of them produces a set of handcuffs.

‘Wait, wait. I’ll talk.’

‘Very wise, Mr Collins. You would not have enjoyed your conversation with the Zuhru.’

‘You are correct, I came here to gather information on your factories.’

‘You are a spy then?’

‘As I said, I am a marketing consultant. I work on behalf of the Val-Mall corporation.’

Mr Hao’s brows furrow. ‘The Val-Mall organization is well regarded by my government, a favoured trading partner. If this is true, why not arrange a simple visit. Why go through this charade?’ He eyes me warily before coming to a decision. ‘No, I do not believe you.’

‘Have you had an opportunity to inspect my laptop?’

‘Not as yet.’

‘Then perhaps you would do so now, or better still, let me show you.’

Hao waves an admonishing finger at me. ‘I think not, Mr Collins. But I am sure you would be kind enough to give me your password.’ He reaches across his desk for my laptop, opens it and powers it up.

‘SiColl42, cap S, cap C. If you open my email account, the password’s the same. Take a look at the email I sent yesterday to MacFadden Springer, there’s a report attached. From this you can see that my role is to help steer positive sentiment for China and Chinese imported goods.’

Within a few clicks I can tell that Hao has opened the report I sent to Tony. He examines it in silence for a few moment before calling over Mr Li. Li takes a look and eventually, nods.

‘What is this MacFadden Springer? It is not the Val-Mall.’

‘MacFadden Springer is the Val-Mall’s UK brand and marketing consultancy, which means our work is of direct benefit to your own industries. I should tell you that I’m aware of the recent agreements significantly increasing the Val-Mall’s uptake of imported goods from your factories. Surely you don’t think the Val-mall would make such an undertaking without some degree of due diligence? You must know that there is currently significant negative feeling towards your government in the West. More particularly, stories have been circulating concerning the terrible conditions and poor treatment of the workers in your factories. If true, this would reflect very poorly on the Val-Mall. My role has been to make an independent assessment as to the truth of these stories. A formal visit and inspection would not have been, shall we say, sufficiently impartial.’

‘Those contracts have already been signed and approved at the highest levels. This makes no sense.’

‘Agreements can always be cancelled. Make no mistake, Mr Hao, my clients are very concerned about the situation. Sales of your country’s products in their stores around the world have been impacted by poor public opinion. In the UK my team and I are working to improve general sentiment but it’s an uphill battle. In the meantime, you detain me here like some kind of criminal. You can keep me here or you can allow me get on with my job.’ I shrug like I couldn’t care less, hoping I haven’t overegged the pudding here, at the same time thanking my lucky stars for the boot polish. Underneath the veneer I’m a furnace-faced pinocchio, the more I lie the redder my face gets.

Hao frowns, considering. The two of them embark on an impassioned but whispered discussion as though I might be able to understand a single word that they’re saying.

Eventually Hao addresses me. ‘It may be that we owe you an apology, Mr Collins, but you will forgive us if we take steps to verify your story.’ He waves the two policemen forward, adding a further instruction in cantonese. Instead of manhandling me as I expected, the men politely indicate that I should stand and follow.

I am shown back to my cell, where I settle to await my fate. It’s not long before one of the policemen returns to drop off a bun and a carton of juice. I insert the straw and gratefully suck away; the drink is orange flavoured and eye-wateringly sweet but any liquid is a welcome relief. I pocket the bun for later and kick my heels. No doubt a team is at this moment checking on my bona fides, at the very least putting in a call to MacFadden Springer.

It appears that our lives are now entirely dependent on Tony, or possibly the Pencil, verifying my employment status. The Pencil will probably just tell them that I’m a biscuini-thieving saboteur and Tony’s the sort of twat who’s perfectly capable of saying he’s never heard of me. Just for a laugh.

About an hour later the door swings open. Again, rather than cuffing me, the policemen courteously indicate that I should accompany them. I take this to be a positive sign and it’s confirmed by Mr Hao’s welcome when I enter his office.

Hao and Li now occupy the sofa, a low rosewood table has been arranged before them set with an array of tea things. Hao grins and waves me over but what truly sets me at ease is the sight of Heavenly seated with them on a low chair, pouring tea from the pot. Her face, unlike mine, is perfectly clean and devoid of boot polish. She cackles at the sight of me. ‘Simon, come and have some tea. You look like you need it.’

‘I’d love some,’ I say, taking the remaining chair. I notice that the carpet has been unsmeared. The Lexotan effect has passed but the proximity of Heavenly achieves much the same thing. I’m calm, prepared for the verdict and under the layer of polish my face has descended to a reasonable room temperature, like a well-served red wine. Only without the red.

Mr Hao beams at me. ‘Mr Collins, it seems we have been somewhat premature in our judgement of you and your delightful companion.’

‘So, you checked me out?’ I ask warily.

‘Most certainly. I can only apologise for the delay in resolving these matters.’ Hao picks up a document from the table. ‘Now you must relax and enjoy our hospitality; the news, of course, is good. We contacted your organization on the telephone and my people were eventually able to obtain confirmation of your employment by MacFadden Springer.’ He produces a pair of round black framed glasses from his jacket pocket, which he puts on before referring to his notes. ‘A Mr Anthony Majestic was able to confirm your role more or less as you have described it.’

Thank God for Tony. Still, I have to wonder why he was so cooperative. ‘My colleagues tend to be very circumspect, if you don’t mind, how did you convince Mr Majestic to discuss this?’

‘We have our ways, Mr Collins.’ Hao taps his nose. ‘But since it appears we are confederates I will tell you that Mr Majestic was most forthcoming when my investigator was able to explain his interest in you.’

A chill descends from my stomach and grips my balls with icy fingers. ‘In what way?’

‘My investigator claimed to be from your Inland Revenue Service, Mr Collins. A tax official confirming your employment. And so your colleague was most helpful.’ Hao chuckles, reading from his notes. ‘He also described you as a…likely tax evader. His words, not mine.’ He waves an admonishing finger.

Nice, Tony. But for once, his malevolence has actually worked in my favour.

 ‘We have also scrutinised the activities of the MacFadden Springer organization. Again, your claims are confirmed. If anything, Mr Collins, you have been overly modest about your company’s contributions. It seems MacFadden Springer have been most energetic on behalf of your client’s interests in these difficult times, which means you have also been helpful to the continuing success of our own industries.’

Heavenly flashes me a what-the-hell? look, I give her an almost imperceptible shake of the head in return, a warning to play along.

‘Thank you, Mr Hao, as you’ll have seen from my report we’re beginning to see very positive results from our recent PR initiatives, particularly from the work we’re doing with the band, ThoughtCrime.’

 ‘Ah, yes. The interview on your BBC was most excellent. We look forward to the forthcoming concert in Beijing. Perhaps you would care to visit us again for this event, this time as honoured guests of the People’s Republic?’

‘My role is minor in all this. I’m just a humble consultant as I said.’

‘Too modest, Mr Collins,’ tuts Hao before reaching for a plate of pastries; he offers them around. ‘Perhaps you will at least accept a po tat. ’

Heavenly demurs, sipping her tea instead. There’s a relatively comfortable silence while Hao, Li and myself munch away at our po tats, which are really just custard tarts and quite tasty.

Hao brushes away the crumbs from his suit tousers before addressing me once more. ‘And now, to the matter of your purpose here. Should you wish for a more complete inspection of our factories?’

‘No, not at all. I have everything I need.’

‘And?’ Mr Hao raises an eyebrow.

‘From what I’ve seen and heard there’s no substance to any of the rumours. The workers are fed, clothed, paid and looked after.The factories are properly run.’

Hao leans forward eagerly. ‘This will be the basis of your report?’ Li eyes me with a wolfish glare; I get the sense that our immediate fates now hang on my answer to this question.

‘Of course. I was sent here to uncover the truth and the truth is what I will report.’

‘Excellent.’

The two officials exchange a glance, which, surprisingly, appears to be one of relief. Hao delicately clears his throat before turning to Heavenly. ‘Unfortunately, Miss Holmes, there has been insufficient time to look into the, ah…circumstances of your own background. You will forgive me if I inquire into your role here?’

 Heavenly’s too smart to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory and doesn’t bat an eyelid. ‘I’m Simon’s fiancé.’ She giggles girlishly. ‘I’ve always wanted to visit China, so when Simon announced he was going on a trip for work…’ She gives him her sunniest smile and reaches over to take my hand.

 Hao says something in Cantonese to Li who nods emphatically. ‘Ahh,’ Hao smiles indulgently, ‘and so you refused to be parted. You must be a young woman of great spirit to stand by your man on such an uncertain venture.’

 Heavenly beams and pats my hand before releasing it. ‘It was just a bit of fun, Mr Hao. A laugh really. I apologise for any trouble we’ve caused you.’

She’s playing this to perfection: naïve, love-struck and possibly slightly retarded. But I think we’ve pushed our luck as far as it’ll go here; I’m keen to get away before some strand of our story comes adrift. I don’t care about the luggage or even my laptop, we have open tickets and my intention now is to get us on a plane as fast as possible. To anywhere that’s not China. ‘Well,’ I announce, ‘I’m glad that’s all cleared up. Thank you for tea and the po tats, we should, uh…’

 ‘Patience, please. There is more to discuss.’

I can feel myself deflating, certain that this is the Colombo moment, the “just one last thing” thing, before the carefully constructed defense is torn to shreds.

‘I wish to you use you as a back-channel, Mr Collins.’

It’s not what I was expecting but it still sounds ominously like some kind of jailhouse rape arrangement.

‘Do not look so startled, Mr Collins. It is a small request, which I have no doubt you will be able to accommodate. You have, after all, put us to some inconvenience. Please, some more tea.’

Heavenly makes her eyes go big as she fills my cup; I sip slowly to avoid having to respond.

‘You understand, of course, the importance of the forthcoming contractual arrangements between ourselves and the Val-Mall corporation?’

‘I do.’

‘Those arrangements cannot be allowed to fail. They are of great economic benefit naturally; the Val-Mall is an immense corporation retailing our products across the globe. But they are more than that. Do you understand the notion of face, Mr Collins?’

‘I’ve been told not, but I believe it’s about dignity, honour, respect and so on.’

‘Indeed. Face is of paramount importance in our culture. Many senior members of the party, government and industry have been closely involved in these negotiations. Should these agreements fail the loss of face will be incalculable. Heads will roll, Mr Collins. So you see, although you describe yourself as a humble functionary, you have become a person of great importance.’

I slowly put down my cup. ‘I’m sorry, I’m afraid I don’t see.’

‘Though you came here without invitation and in an underhand manner, your presence is fortunate for us since we should like you to communicate some important information to your clients. Information that cannot be communicated directly.’ Hao extends a pudgy hand, helping himself to another po tat and leans back on the sofa allowing Li to take over.

‘I assume you know of Extermination Revolution?’

Heavenly’s cup clatters splashing tea across the table. A few drops trickle onto the carpet before she catches the spill in a paper serviette. ‘I’m so sorry.’

Hao waves a dismissive hand. ‘Think nothing of it, Miss Holmes, the carpet has been smeared and requires a steam clean in any case.’ He gives me a wry look.

‘I’ve heard of them. They’re the ones who hold up London traffic in their pants,’ I say, hijacking Tony’s description.

Li sighs at my apparent ignorance. ‘It is an organisation of radical environmentalists based in your country. They do a great deal more than just stop traffic. Extermination Revolution is no longer a small but noisy extremist movement. It is like a virus and has spread to countries across Europe and is now gaining a foothold in the United States.’

‘Ah, yes, those people, the tree-huggers,’ I confirm, echoing Tony again.

‘The tree-huggers, as you call them, are the ones driving this boycott of Chinese goods for their own reasons. It is not a random inclination of the people but a well-organised and deliberate attack on our economy. I tell you this so that you and your colleagues can fully understand the problem we face.’

‘How can you be sure it’s just one organization behind the boycott. It’s very widespread?’

 ‘Because they have been blackmailing us, Mr Collins. Extortion.’

 ‘What?’ Heavenly interjects before she can stop herself. She quickly covers, reverting to the charming ignoramus. ‘What’s extortion? I don’t know what that means.’

 Mr Li raises an eyebrow. I’m not sure how Heavenly’s naïvity is playing with Li, after all, he’s seen her boot Wen in the balls. ‘Blackmail, Miss Holmes. Their demands on us have become unreasonable. It seems we have created a monster.’

 Hao hisses, shutting Li down. ‘Enough. We simply require you to pass on a message to your client. Please assure them that this problem is temporary and will be dealt with. Matters are in hand.’

 ‘Matters are in hand?’

 ‘Steps are being taken.’

 ‘What steps?’

 ‘You do not need to know this.’

 ‘Why don’t you tell them yourselves?’

 Hao shrugs, ‘Face. Deniability. Those at the highest levels invariably prefer to keep their hands clean.’

 ‘I see. But you must realise that I’m just a humble…’

 ‘Yes, yes, we understand how humble you are, Mr Collins, but we also know that you are somewhat resourceful. And devious. I’m confident you will find a way to deliver our message.’

 ‘So, are we free to go?

 ‘Indeed. Unless you would enjoy another po tat.’

 ‘Thank you, I think I’m po tatted out.’

 Hao and Li get to their feet. We shake hands like we’re the best of friends. Li produces our passports from his jacket pocket.

 ‘Your luggage has been packed and awaits in your transport. You will be returning to the UK immediately, courtesy of the People’s Republic.’ Hao indicates our laptops and phones still stacked on his desk. ‘Please.’

Chpt

As before, Li joins us in the police van, sitting up front. This time though, other than for the driver, there are no policeman accompanying us. We sit in silence as we’re driven at speed to the airport with lights and sirens flashing and blaring. Li, however, is in the mood to talk. ‘You are most fortunate that an interview with the Zuhru was not required.’

 ‘Oh?’ I respond noncomittally.

 ‘You recall the very small individual who was present earlier?’

 ‘The dwarf?’

 ‘Indeed. That is the Zuhru.’

 ‘He didn’t look like much,’ I say.

 ‘That is easy for you to say now. Earlier, when you refused to confess, I feared that Mr Hao was about to place you into his hands.’

 ‘An interrogator?’

 Li turns in his seat and smiles. ‘A myth, Mr Collins. The Zuhru are an ancient line and have always been with us here in China.’

 ‘Doing what?’

 ‘Many things. Unpleasant tasks. I do not approve of the Zuhru and his activities, so I am content that his services were not required here.’

 ‘How unpleasant?’ I say, not wanting to hear the answer but, like the tongue’s compulsion to probe and explore a rotting tooth, I can’t help asking.

Li grimaces. ‘I should explain that the Zuhru is not a single individual but a lineage. A family line going way back in our history. Dwarves have appeared in every generation of this family. And what distinguishes them is a lack of human feeling. Sometimes called, what would best translate as… ah…the Midgets of Murder. The mere mention of them is often used to frighten naughty children. The Zuhru have served throughout China’s history as torturers, poisoners and assassins; they served the imperial dynasties as they now serve the people.’

‘Christ, and Hao was going to throw me to one of these bastards?’

‘You must understand the absolute need to protect our factories and the economy, particularly at this difficult time. Mr Hao has been charged with this vital duty by the people. He cannot betray their trust. But you flatter yourself, Mr Collins. The Zuhru is rarely seen outside of Beijing, certainly this is the first time I have seen him. I do not think he was brought here just for you.’

‘That makes me feel so much better,’ I say, though I think the irony is lost on Li.

The van screeches to a halt directly outside the departures entrance where we’re met by another group of uniformed policemen who hand us tickets for a China Southern Airlines flight before unloading our backpacks from the van. I take a moment to transfer our laptops into the backpacks and to seek out my Lexotan which has been shoved into one of the pockets. Not for me, but for Heavenly; she’s uncharacteristically subdued and I can see that she’s becoming anxious about the flight. I hand her one and she knocks it back without water.

We shake hands with Li, who, when all’s said and done, isn’t such a bad sort. The uniforms whisk us through passport control, which is just as well, since I’m even less recognisable than the last time, having had no opportunity to remove all the dried boot polish from my face. I expect I resemble an overgrown Dickensian street urchin.

 After a short wait in an empty VIP area we board the flight and are shown to First Class seats, where a stewardess pointedly brings me a stack of moist towelette wipes and I’m finally able to get to work on my face. The compartment is mostly empty but it’s only when the stewardess has returned to the galley, that we feel sufficiently safe to break our self-imposed silence.

 ‘You’ve got a lot of explaining to do,’ announces Heavenly.

 ‘So do you,’ I retort.

 ‘You’ve been secretly working for those bastards all this time.’

 ‘I’ve been doing my job, that’s all. I never said I was going to chuck it all in.’

 ‘Doing sneaky things for a company that’s been undermining everything we’ve been working for. I thought you were on our side.’

 ‘I am on your side, Heavenly. Always. But from what I can see there are no good guys here. Just Paul and Ben feathering their nests.’

 ‘You don’t know that for sure.’

 ‘This is all about the money. Those weasels have been extorting the Chinese. Hao said as much.’

 ‘What makes you think he was telling the truth? Maybe you got so carried away with your own cleverness that it never occurred to you that Hao wasn’t buying your story at all.’

 ‘So why let us go?’

 ‘To undermine Extermination Revolution. We go back, tell everyone that the whole boycott’s a scam, Paul and Ben are just in it for the money and that’s the end of them and their movement. Nuisance disappears, problem solved, business as usual. Everyone goes back to being good little consumers. We’re being played, Simon.’

 ‘Why go to all that trouble when the Chinese easily could do it themselves?’

 ‘Credibility. It’s a much better story coming from somebody who’s already part of the movement.’

 ‘Occam’s Razor,’ I retort.

 ‘What’s that supposed to mean? Apart from the fact that you badly need a shave. And a shower actually.’ She wrinkles her nose.

 ‘If there are two explanations for a thing, it’s usually the simplest, which is the correct one. In other words, those two charlatans, Paul and Ben, are the wrong ‘uns.’

 ‘Fine,’ replies Heavenly savagely tugging at her belt to tighten it, ‘we’ll put it to them when we get home. But you’ve got no evidence, just the word of a shifty Chinese government official with an obvious agenda.’

 ‘Extermination Revolution came out of nowhere almost overnight. And just look at their offices, and all the fish. That stuff costs money and I’ll bet that’s only the tip of the iceberg.’

 Heavenly sneers. ‘Fish? Pish.’

 Dr Seuss is interrupted by the captain’s voice over the intercom, meanwhile our stewardess reappears to perform emergency exit semaphore.

 ‘Oh fuck,’ jibbers Heavenly over the increasing whine of the engines, ‘we’re about to take off.’ She siezes my arm with that vice-like grip and scrunches her eyes tight shut while the aircraft lurches forward.

 ‘Thank God,’ I mutter.

Heavenly remains like this as the aircraft lifts off and reaches cruising altitude; after a while, though her eyes remain shut, her face relaxes. Her head slowly drops to my shoulder and I know she’s going to be more or less out cold until we touch down in Heathrow.

‘Wakey, wakey, eggs and bakey,’ croons Heavenly as she withdraws a wet finger from my earhole. ‘Actually there’s only one egg in the fridge. And your coffee is a disgrace to the planet. And I don’t eat bacon. Rise and shine. We need to get out and find some breakfast.’

 I open a gluey eye to see Heavenly, fresh and glowing with good health as she prances around in one of my shirts. This is all a bit unfair as I didn’t get anything like enough sleep on the flight back. Heavenly, on the other hand, slept like the dead on the first leg, then drifted like the undead in a benzodiazepine haze through the entire tense stopover in Beijing. I manhandled her back onto the connecting flight and she went out like a light again. I sat and fretted until we were well clear of Chinese airspace, but even then only dozed, jerking awake every few minutes in a fearsweat brought on by the horrors of what might have been.

Still flush with the remainder of Paul and Ben’s cash, we cabbed it from Heathrow. It was almost ten by the time we arrived at my flat, exhausted and wrung out. I gave Heavenly the bed and made up the couch for myself before crashing, still in my pantomime burglar’s outfit, unshaven and no doubt smelling even worse than Paul and Ben’s forthcoming bullshit explanations.

‘You should definitely have a shower first though, you reek,’ confirms Heavenly, backing away from me.

Rather than breakfasting at a café, we picked up a few groceries at my local Tesco Express, mainly because Heavenly wanted to be sure that the coffee was fair trade, the eggs organic, free range and donated by fully consenting chickens or some such.

 I feel a good deal better with some food inside me and we sip our Tesco’s finest Guatemalan at the table in a comfortable silence. Heavenly produces a vape device and begins to puff away, scenting the air with bubble gum, which isn’t actually as bad as it sounds.

 ‘Well, traitor?’

 ‘Well, what?’ I respond.

 ‘Time to come clean.’

 ‘Come clean about what?’

 ‘All that stuff you showed Hao. The work you’ve secretly been doing for the enemy.’

 ‘I’m not working for the enemy,’ I sigh, ‘right now I don’t know who the enemy is. They’re all as bad as each other if you ask me. I’m just doing my job, Heavenly.’

 She snorts, ‘ “I was only following orders,”’

 ‘Not fair. I’m not actually participating in any of the stuff that’s being done by MacFadden Springer or the Val-Mall. I’m just monitoring. I’m a scorer counting the runs. Or better yet, the U.N.’

 Heavenly blows a stream of vapour into my face. ‘Which stands for Unspeakable N…nobhead.’

 ‘Knobhead begins with a K.’

 ‘I know, I couldn’t think of anything suitable off the top of my head. So what is it that you’re monitoring?’

 I shrug, ‘Mainly what you know. The big news is that they’ve got ThoughtCrime on board.’

 ‘Why am I not surprised? I never liked them anyway with their sexist videos. Bland, mainstream, mid-tempo rubbish masquerading as rock. And that Figgsy twat. Leather-pant-wearing hypocrite. Is it working?’

 ‘Seems to be. The Figgsy narrative is that China is a utopian dream for workers. The government is pulling out all the stops to reduce carbon footprint, emmisions and so forth. Doing a lot better than the West as a matter of fact.They deserve our support, et cetera.’

 Heavenly puffs away thoughtfully. ‘Fine. You can help us then. Keep us informed about what the other side is up to. You can be our spy in the camp.’

 I sip my coffee, ‘I’m on your side, Heavenly, not Paul and Ben’s.’

 ‘That reminds me. I emailed Ben first thing this morning. He says we can keep the expenses money and he wants to meet with us tomorrow. I gave him the bad news.’

 ‘The bad news about him and his partner being a couple of shameless scam artists?’

Heavenly rolls her eyes. ‘Funny, Simon. The bad news about our mission. If you really think he’s on the take or whatever, then here’s your opportunity. Ask him straight out. See how he reacts.’

‘I will.’

‘Good. So you’ll come?’

‘I will.’

‘Good. I’ll have to stay over again though.’

‘I’d like that,’ I say.

Heavenly smiles, ‘why?’

I pause and consider my answer. I want to tell her that she’s exasperating, impulsive, obstinate and often stroppy, that she’s a mighty force turning my life upside down. I was perfectly content to shelter from the world inside a safe, imaginary kingdom populated by nerds and fantasists until she prised me out like a reluctant winkle. But I also want to tell her that I’m happy when she’s around. That when we’re not committing burglary, being arrested or threatened with torture, I’m no longer so anxious; on occasion, I’d even describe myself as courageous. She’s determined to save the planet, but I think it might be me she’s really saving.

‘It’s strange, but I don’t take so many Lexotan when you’re around,’ I say.

Heavenly sighs and gets to her feet. ‘I need clean clothes. I take it your machine works?’

‘You won’t like my detergent. I think it’s tested on baby seals.’

‘Thought as much, which is why I bought some eco-friendly. And some hair dye. I’m going back to magnifent magenta.’

‘I like your hair as it is.’

‘Thank you, Simon, but I look like a dork.’

Heavenly disappears into the bedroom to gather up the smelly clothes from our rucksacks. I finish the coffee and reach for my laptop. No matter where my sympathies lie, I’ve still got a job to do. But if it makes Heavenly happy, I’m content to share any new initiatives from MacFadden Springer and the Val-Mall. As expected, there’s an email from Debbie containing a report summarizing the latest PR activity and corresponding sentiment changes.

It’s good news for China: it seems that a whole army of celebrities and B-listers have been roped in to endorse the country and their exports: Hollywood couple, Clifferella - Cliff Adams and Isobella Tatum - have announced that they’ll shortly be traveling to China to pick up their seventh adopted baby; fashion designer, Justin Pfuff, has launched, Silk Road, a range of fragrances inspired by the scents of the Orient; bad boy of the contemporary art world, Desmond Hodge, has unveiled a new installation in the Tate Modern, an armoured panda standing guard in a tank of piss wearing David Hockney glasses, which he’s calling The Wise Man of Xian; and then there’s a new twenty-seven-spice artisan spirit from Unified Distillers called BeyGin.

This is bigger than just the Val-Mall, it’s evidence of a collosally powerful state flexing its PR muscle, what the party is publically referring to as “discourse control”. It’s evident they’ve been pouring enormous resources into influencing Western media, public opinion and academia. But it’s not all party-sponsored, some of these activities are homegrown and I can discern elements of Tony’s strategy in play here. For example, Romance Island’s Jess Tong has created and endorsed a new line of lingerie made entirely of Chinese silk called ‘Tong’s Thongs’. That certainly has Tony’s grubby hands all over it. Hundreds of UK-based Gen Z influencers have been given mountains of free product to talk up. No doubt they’ve also been well primed and paid to argue against the boycott, which they appear to be doing with surprising eloquence. The central tenet appears to be that the boycott, if it continues, rather than helping poor Chinese workers, will eventually put most of them out of work. And frankly, it’s not a bad argument. And then there’s the discrediting-of-the-opposition stuff: the not-so-surprising bombshell that Ben Owen, founding partner of Extermination Revolution, owns a twenty-six and a half million dollar mansion on the Pacific Coast Highway in Malibu.

Which is also a pretty persuasive argument.

‘This might interest you,’ announces Heavenly, dropping a soiled and crumpled white cloth in front of me.

 I examine the article. It’s a blood-stained piece of cotton with the embroidered words “True Blue. Authentic Denim Jeans. Size M,” accompanied by the tiny image of a bucking bronco. The same thing is repeated five times in a row down to the ragged end; a strip of five uncut labels for a denim clothing line.

 ‘Thanks, it’s got dried blood on it.’

 ‘Your blood, Simon. I took it out of the pocket of your ninja trousers before I washed them.’

 ‘Yeah, thank you. I really don’t want a souvenir. I’m hoping to eradicate the entire incident from my memory. So you can bin the trousers too.’

 ‘Read it.’

 ‘True Blue. It’s the same line as the jeans Toby bought me. Authentic Denim Jeans. Blood stain. Size Medium. More blood.’

‘Read it properly.’

‘I have, Heavenly, What’s your point?’

‘Read the last line on each label.’

‘It’s just blood. My blood, which I shed for you.’

Heavenly slaps the table, ‘Yes, well done, you cracked your head in the factory but only because you’re a lanky idiot. What does it say? What does the small print say?’

 ‘Made in the UK,’ I concede.

 ‘Made in the UK,’ Heavenly reiterates. ‘What we have here are the embroidered labels for jeans manufactured for the Val-Mall in Shaxi. So why would the labels say “Made in the UK”?’

 ‘I think you know why,’ I reply.

We’re interrupted by the sudden trumpeting of my phone. ‘Where’s my report?’ barks the voice.

 ‘Yes, I’m fine, Tony. Thanks for asking.’

 ‘Don’t be a smartarse, Simon, doesn’t suit you.’

 ‘I’m working on it now. Give me an hour or two.’

 ‘Topline?’

 ‘All good. Big upward spike. Looks like there’s already been a large upswing in positive sentiment on the back of the latest activity, especially the ThoughtCrime connection.’

 ‘Good. And Tong’s Thongs, how’s that tracking?’

 ‘Great initiative, Tony.’

 ‘Yeah, that was one of mine. Right, I’m pushed for time but I’ve got another job for you.’

 ‘Sounds good, only I do have a lot on my plate right now.’

 ‘That’s because you can still afford to eat. Turn me down, see what happens.’

 ‘Fine, Tony. What is it?’

 ‘I need you for the Beaglehole thing next Saturday.’

 ‘Ok.’

 ‘Our relatively modest Sporting Goods launch at the Newbury Mall has now inflated into a pretty significant event. As you’re aware, Cy Beaglehole is coming over and he feels we need to be making something more of a statement, a demonstration of confidence. ThoughtCrime are making an appearance. It’ll be like a mini festival but, you know, something for all the family. Generate some nifty PR.’

 ‘So where do I come in?’

 ‘I’ve got my hands full dealing with the ThoughtCrime people. So I need you to help Pinsley out with the family stuff.’

 ‘And what exactly does the family stuff entail?’

 ‘I dunno, shit that kids like. Bouncy castles, facepainting, entertainers, glue. Use your imagination.’

 ‘You do realise that I don’t know the first thing about kids?’

 ‘Pinsley just needs an extra pair of hands. The team’s overstretched managing those greedy twat so-called influencers.’

 ‘But I’m not a people person, Tony, you’re…’

 ‘Hold up, gotta call coming through on the other line… a certain mega-famous musician. I want that report in two hours and make sure you touch base with Pinsley today. Oh, and a bit of advice. Do your tax returns.’ He cuts me off to speak to his new best mate. Obviously, Tony’s far too busy schmoozing rock stars to be bothered with the sad clowns and facepainters.

Heavenly, puffing away madly, has appropriated my laptop and is busily devouring the contents of Debbie’s report. I can tell when she gets to the bit about Ben because her shoulders sag. ‘Shit,’ she exhales.

 ‘Told you,’ I say, perhaps a little too smugly.

 Heavenly grimaces. ‘You have to hand it to them, your mates don’t mess about when they go after someone.’

 ‘You think the Ben story is spin?’

 ‘Course it is.’

 ‘It’s proof of what I’ve been saying. Ben, at least, is on the take. Probably has been since the beginning. “It seems we have created a monster.” Li’s words before Hao shut him down. I think Extermination Revolution has been funded by China since the beginning. And now they’ve got greedy.’

 ‘Oh balls, Simon. You don’t like Ben, because he’s everything you’re not.’

 ‘Is he?’

 ‘I didn’t mean that, Simon. I’m just frustrated.’ She raises the bloody white cloth and waves it like a flag. ‘Just when I think we’ve found a smoking gun. They drop a bloody great bomb on us.’

 But then Heavenly’s just dropped a bloody great bomb on me. Ben is smooth, confident, well-dressed, urbane, good-looking, and it seems, open-handed with his cash, which suggests that she thinks I’m the opposite of all those things. ‘He’s a crook and I’m not,’ I mutter. ‘That’s opposite.’

 ‘Oh, grow up, Simon. There’ll be a perfectly reasonable explanation. We need to talk to Ben about what to do with this,’ she indicates the white cloth.

 ‘Whatever,’ I say, reaching for my laptop, ‘I’ve got work to do.’

 ‘Anything you’d like to share?’

 ‘If you must know, I’ve just been made chief clown-wrangler for the launch of the new Sporting Goods line at the Val-Mall.’

 ‘We’re protesting that.’

 ‘So am I. It’s bloody demeaning and I don’t even know any clowns. I hate clowns. I find them terrifying.’

 ‘Why clowns?’

 ‘Goes back to when I was a kid. There was this one time…’

 ‘I’m not sure I want a guided tour into the warped psyche of Simon Collins just now. Why do they want clowns for the launch?’

 ‘It’s turned into quite a big event.’

 ‘Well then that calls for a big protest,’ she grins. ‘Speaking of which, it’s time I returned to my true form.’

 I give her a quizzical look.

 ‘Getting back to my roots. Dying them at any rate.’

I’m done with Tony’s latest report and have just pinged it off when Heavenly emerges from my bathroom, all magenta-haired and rejuvenated eco-warrior, wearing one of my shirts and a pair of cargo shorts. She wanders off into the kitchen where I hear glass clinking as she rummages through my cupboards. ‘Kahlua and vodka. Weird combo.’

 ‘It’s for a White Russian.’

 I hear stifled laughter. ‘That is so you, Simon.’

 ‘Yeah, I expect Ben prefers Kristal. He can certainly afford it.’

 Heavenly reappears swigging from the Smirnoff bottle. ‘I don’t know what it is but let’s have a White Russian then. We deserve a drink.’

 ‘You need cream and I don’t have any.’

 Heavenly waggles the bottle at me. ‘I spotted a tin of condensed milk in your cupboard. How’s that sound?’

 ‘Worth a shot.’ I open Spotify on my laptop and connect the speakers.

We decide to call it a Condenski and, on balance, it’s not that gross. Particularly after the second or third. Heavenly’s right, we needed a drink and, by the time she attempts a Cossack dance to David Guetta’s Titanium and ends up flat on her arse, I’m in a better mood. Good enough to make a major assault on the long neglected Mr Buffington components.

Heavenly and I settle cross-legged on the carpet and begin screwing bits of black tubing together in a random fashion, Fun’s “We are young” blasting away in the background.

My phone trumpets. I assume it’s Tony again, but instead it’s a brisk, businesslike transatlantic twang. ‘Simon Collier?’

 ‘Speaking.’

 ‘Simon, it’s Mary Pinsley from MacFadden. I understand you’ve agreed to organize the family entertainment for next Saturday’s event.’

 ‘Help,’ I say, by way of correction.

 ‘Do you have a problem, Simon?’

 ‘No.’

 ‘So why are you calling for help?’

 ‘I agreed to help. Not actually organize the whole thing.’

 There’s a pause and an intake of breath. ‘It seems we have a fundamental misunderstanding. My team is stretched to breaking point with these influencer fuckers. Personally, I’m having to spend most of my time dealing with ThoughtCrime. They’re very labour-intensive, Simon. I understood from Tony that you would be sourcing all the clowns and shit. Am I wrong?’

 ‘Well...’

 ‘Look, I just don’t have the capacity, Simon. Figgsy is very needy. I understand you’re a freelance?’

 ‘I am.’

 ‘Ok, so fuckin’ take your lance and feel free to shove it up your ass. Or you can get busy and book me some family entertainment. How hard can be to find some balloons and a bouncy castle?’

 ‘I’ll do my best, Mary.’

 ‘Don’t call me Mary. It’s Ms Pinsley.’

Heavenly pauses in the process of running a tension wire around one of the pulleys, she raises a quizzical eyebrow.

‘Don’t suppose you know anything about kids,’ I say.

 ‘I know how they’re made.’

 ‘That’s not what I’m asking.’

 ‘Sorry, Simon. Forgot how prudish you were. I was being fasish…faceish…’

 ‘Facetious.’

 ‘That’s easy for you to say.’ She pours herself another Condenski from the jug. ‘It so happens that I’ve got a niece, she likes facepainting, bouncy castles and unicorns.’

 ‘Know any face-painters?’

 Heavenly gives me a sly smile, ‘As a matter of fact I do.’

 ‘Forget I asked.’

 ‘I’m not joking, I’ve been doing it at festivals for years.’

 ‘You’ll do something awful.’

 ‘Most likely.’

 ‘I’ll lose my job.’

 ‘Probably. But I don’t think that job is for you, Simon. I think you’re made for better things.’

 ‘Like what?’

 She examines me, slightly squiffy-eyed over the rim of her Mexican glass tumbler. ‘With your height and colouring I think you should consider a role in transport control.’

 ‘How so?’

 ‘You’d make a perfect stop light.’

 ‘Ha ha. Very amusing.’

 ‘No, seriously,’ she cackles, ‘you should speak to Toby. You remember he had an entertainment management agency? I think he might still know a few performers in the local area.’

 ‘He’s a Sadim. They’ll be the pits. Paedos most likely.’

 ‘What do you care?’

 She’s right, what do I care? I have no real investment in the success of this launch. If I do it well Mary Pinsley will take all the credit, cock it up, I lose a job that I’ve become increasingly uncomfortable with, one which mainly involves being pushed around by unconscionable bullies.

 ‘Oh, go on, Simon,’ she pleads. ‘Let me call Toby, we’ll book his best.’

 ‘Yeah, why not,’ I growl as the pounding music and the alcohol compound to infuse me with a blend of recklessness and abandon. ‘Unleash the Sadim. Book his best. Let him do his worst.’

 Heavenly discards Buffington nuts and bolts and produces her phone. She stabs a wavering finger at the screen, and after a couple of misdials, obtains a connection. ‘Toby, Tobes. How are you?’ She puts him on speaker, grinning expectantly.

 ‘I’m fine, Heavenly. I hate to bring it up, but I do hope you’re calling me about the rent, which is now two months overdue.’

 ‘Not as such. Though as it happens I do find myself unexpectedly in funds. I can pay, tomorrow actually, in cash, but only if you agree to demonstrate with us next Saturday.’

 ‘The Val-Mall thingy? I suppose I could come along for an hour or two if it makes you happy.’

 ‘I really called to see if I could frack your remaining brain deposits.’

 ‘Frack away. Though you’ll find little of value in the depths of my cerebellum.’

 ‘I’m after children’s entertainers. Since you used to have that entertainment management agency, I thought you might still know a few people: clowns, jugglers, magicians, that sort of thing.’

 ‘Might be able to help, what’s it for?’

 ‘Actually, the Val-Mall thing.’

 ‘I don’t understand, dear girl.’

 ‘You know, stuff for kids.’

 ‘But you depise the Val-Mall. Now it sounds like you’re working for them. Have you been drinking, at all?’

 ‘Only a couple of Condenskis. New cocktail, all the rage in London right now. Well, this very small part of London, which is Simon’s flat. You remember Simon Collins? Tall, red face, no trousers?’

 ‘Yes, I remember Simon, but I’m still confused.’

 ‘It’s complicated. Don’t worry about it.’

 I have to wonder whether “it’s complicated” refers to me, us or the Val-Mall.

 ‘Well, it all sounds rather odd but I might still know a few people. There was an excellent escapologist from Thatcham, The Great Echapper, he called himself, very impressive. No wait, he died. Practising at home in the nuddy as I recall, handcuffed himself, then somehow managed to hang himself from the stairway with a pair of lady’s tights. Can’t have been all that great really. There’s The Amazing Matthew, the Thames Valley mentalist, who might still be around.’

 ‘Too serious.’

‘There’s always Mr Fraggles, I suppose. He might still be at it.’

‘What’s he do?’

‘Clown, ventriloquist. Bit of a misery though.’

‘Aren’t they all? He sounds perfect.’

‘I’ll ping you his number and anyone else I can think of. I hope you know what you’re doing, Heavenly.’

‘I’ll be fine, Toby. Thank you.’

‘Thank me with the rent.’

Heavenly cuts the connection and gleefully pockets the phone. ‘You absolutely have to book Mr Fraggles. He sounds like the worst.’ She wanders over to my laptop to examine my playlist. ‘Time to slow it down a little,’ she announces, before clicking on a track. She advances towards me, arms outretched as Tracy Chapman’s “Baby can I hold you” begins to play. ‘Come on, dance with me, Simon.’

I shake my head. ‘I don’t…’

She grabs my wrists and hauls me upright, before placing my arms firmly round her shoulders.

We slowly gyrate.

‘Yes, I’m well aware of the allegations,’ says Ben smoothly. ‘And in fact I have to say that they are substantially true.’

 ‘You actually own a multi-million dollar condo in Malibu?’ queries Heavenly, sipping her Golden latte.

 ‘Guilty,’ grins Ben, raising a tanned and toned arm. ‘Before I found my true vocation, I was one of the Silicon Valley crowd. I made a ton of money with an online credit approval and transfers site. I put a lot of it into setting up this place but not everything.’ He grins, ‘So, yes, I have a nice chunk of real estate in Malibu. Shoot me.’

 ‘I have no intention of shooting you, Ben. But Simon had some concerns.’

 ‘I can see that Simon’s opinion means a great deal to you,’ observes Ben, with the blandest of smiles.

In truth, I couldn’t say one way or the other. Heavenly and I managed to avoid all the uncomfortable business of undressing and sleeping last night, mainly because we ended up so collosally pissed. She puked into my briefcase before I half-carried, half-dragged her to my bed, accompanied by her loud falsetto rendition of Cher’s “Believe” on a continuous loop. I covered her with my duvet before crashing out on the sofa. We’ve been operating with a wary, slightly embarassed formality since we woke up this morning.

The gentle blueish light of the giant fish tanks and soothing hum of the aerator system is helping to mitigate the after-effects of all those Condenskis; I’m now feeling well enough to jump in. ‘Ben, the Chinese allege you were blackmailing them with your boycott.’ No point beating around the bush.

Ben chuckles. ‘Well, of course, what would you expect them to say? I’m only sorry you weren’t able to get the girl out. But really, it was always a long shot. You did an amazing job, both of you.’

‘It wasn’t a total failure,’ announces Heavenly, flourishing our bloody white cloth. ‘We picked this up in the factory. We know that the True Blue brand is a Val-Mall line. What this shows is that they’re selling a line of Chinese-manufactured clothing on the basis that it’s made in the UK. Just one example, how many other lines are they doing this with?’

 Ben examines the fabric labels and is quick to pick up the anomaly: ‘”Made in the UK”. And you found this where exactly?’

 ‘The Lucky Orchid warehouse. Part of a large bale.’

 Ben takes a deep breath. ‘Assuming it’s not an isolated incident, it shows international fraud on what could be an unprecedented scale. Where’s the blood from?’

 ‘Mine,’ I say.

 ‘Shame. Be nice to say it’s from a martyr who gave his life for the cause,’ Ben winks at Heavenly.

 ‘Sorry, to disappoint, but the martyr did in fact survive.’

 ‘Simon ran into a shelf. He’s quite tall,’ explains Heavenly.

 For a while Ben taps his chin with a finger, considering. ‘On its own, it tells us what they’re up to but it’s not unassailable proof. How can we convince people it genuinely comes from the Shaxi factory? You could just as easily have come by this at, shall we say, a denim factory here in London.’ He sighs and shakes his head mournfully. ‘At this stage there’s not a lot we can do with it. What we’d really need are the Val-Mall’s import documents: commercial invoices, bills of lading and so forth. They have to state country of origin and so, of course, they’ll have been forged or tampered with in some way.’

 ‘So, where do we find these documents?’ asks Heavenly.

 ‘They’ll be securely locked away in the company files. Way beyond our reach.’

 ‘Digital or physical?’

 ‘Both, actually. There’ll be a paper trail somewhere along the distribution network and no doubt copies will be held on a secure central server somewhere.’ He shrugs, handing back the cloth. ‘Keep it. Put a photo out on social media, by all means, but it’ll only ever be your word against theirs.’

 ‘Unless, we can get our hands on their import documents.’

 Ben nods and smiles complacently, ‘Good luck with that.’ He finishes the last of his Golden Latte, smacking his lips, an unconscious imitation of the fish, which burble away all around us.

We descend the office stairs, arriving at the open plan area below. At this hour of the morning the space is relatively empty, which is why my eye is drawn to a short, stocky figure in a suit emerging from the dark corridor at the far side of room.

 ‘Fuck,’ I say, grabbing Heavenly by the elbow. I hustle her into one of the Think Pods.

 ‘What the hell, Simon?’ she objects.

 I try to quiet her but she’s not happy. She kicks a foot through the Pod’s Velcro seal to reveal a face I’ve seen once for real and twice in my nightmares.

 The figure gazes at me stony-faced through the aperture.

‘Hello, can I help you?’ queries Heavenly climbing out. ‘Are you lost?’

The dwarf narrows his eyes and wags an admonishing finger before turning away, heading off in the direction of the office stairs.

‘It was the bloody Zuhru, I swear it,’ I insist in the cab on the way to Paddington.

 ‘That’s appalling of you, Simon. Just because he was Asian and a midget. They don’t all look the same, you know.’

 ‘I know that. But it was him. I’d know him anywhere with his creepy face. Besides, I think he’s technically a dwarf, not a midget.’

 ‘What’s the difference?’

 ‘I don’t actually know.’

 ‘Well, you’re being racist. And dwarfist.’

 ‘He was in Hao’s office when they first brought me in, I got a really good look at him. It was the Zuhru all right.’

 ‘You’re being paranoid. He’s probably just a guy who works for Extermination Revolution. Dwarves are allowed to be concerned about the planet too, you know.’

 ‘I should imagine they’re very good for the planet, what with taking up less space and leaving a smaller footprint. But not that one. That one is bad news for everyone.’

 ‘What is wrong with you, Simon? What on earth would the Zuhru be doing in London at the offices of Extermination Revolution?’

 Our cab turns off Praed Street and into London Road where it pulls in. Heavenly steps down onto the pavement while I haul her rucksack out. Heavenly pays the cabbie with a coupe of notes from her thick stack of expenses cash.

 ‘He was carrying a briefcase so I can only imagine he was there to make another payoff to Ben.’

 Heavenly rolls her eyes. ‘Not that again. I thought Ben gave a perfectly reasonable explaination.’

 ‘I just don’t buy it. Wanting a thing to be true, doesn’t make it so.’

 ‘I could say the same for you. You desperately want that bloody little man to be the Zuhru because it fits your anti-Ben narrative.’

 ‘I know what I saw, Heavenly.’

 ‘Here,’ she says curtly, splitting the stack of tens and twenties. ‘your half.’

 ‘Keep it, you’re the one who really earned it.’

 ‘Suit yourself, Simon.’ She pockets the cash and hoists her backpack onto her shoulders.

 I watch as she strides off towards the station entrance, hoping that she might at least turn and wave or something. She doesn’t.

I spend the next few days mooching about the apartment. MacFadden’s gone quiet, presumably because they’re all chasing their tails, pandering to Figgsy’s every whim. I knock out another report for Tony and send it off. He’ll be pleased if he ever gets around to reading it. Sentiment is bouncing back up and there’s a good deal of online chatter about the ThoughtCrime presence at the Newbury launch. In the meantime, I check my phone every twenty minutes or so in the hope that Heavenly has called or messaged. The phone remains blank and silent, a depressing testament to my inability to connect with normal human beings. It seems I can only deal with numbers on a spread sheet: certainties, rather than people, who are messy and unreadable. I’m like one of those old biddies who have spent too much time living on their own: selfish, peevish and paranoid. Like my own Grammy Rose, who in her final months swore blind that my dad was gassing her bedroom at night. That’s me, adamantly insisting that Ben, Heavenly’s hero, is a liar and a scoundrel, and that behind every corner is a murderous dwarf, out to get me.

I text the word, “Sorry”, leave the phone and head off to the kitchen to make myself a coffee. Almost immediately there’s a trumpet blast sounding the triple-tone clarion of Eringord. I sprint back to my desk, my socks sending me skidding across the parquet floor in my haste to pick up.

‘What you got for me?’ The brusque voice of Tony.

‘I just sent you today’s report.’

‘Yeah, got that. What about the other business?’

‘What other business?’

‘The clowns and bouncy castles and all that twaddle.’

‘Oh, yeah, good.’

‘What the fuck does that mean?’

‘It’s going well.’

‘Pinsley said you were being difficult about it.’

‘I wasn’t. I just didn’t expect to have the whole thing dumped in my lap.’

‘Pinsley’s busy helping me out with Figgsy. Had an epic night on the Chang at Annabel’s; turns out that he’s taken a bit of shine to Pinsley. Fuck knows why. I’d rather bonk a donkey. No accounting for tatse. Speaking of which: Donkey rides. There you go. You can have that one for nothing. So whatcha got so far?’

‘I’ve got a face-painter. And a clown.’

‘That’s it?’

‘So far.’

There’s a silence on the other end. I can sense Tony’s working himself up and decide it might be best not to tell him that my face-painter is the leader of an anti-Mall protest group who’s seriously pissed off with me and the clown in question might be retired or possibly dead.

‘Do you have any idea how big this thing is, Simon?’

‘Of course, I’ve just written the report. Sentiment is on the rise. People are very excited, especially about ThoughtCrime. It’s quite a coup, Tony.’

‘We’re expecting thousands. Most of them bringing their families. So one shitty clown and a face painter isn’t going to cut it, is it, Simon?’

‘I’m working on it.’ I have the phone clamped between my shoulder and chin while I click away at my laptop, desperately searching for bouncy castles.

‘Get a grip, Simon. I will not be embarassed in front of Cy Beaglehole.’

‘I’ve been in negotiaitions with a bouncey castle company. There’s Pirate Cove, Tropical Harbour and a Funky Fortress.’

‘Get ‘em all. Money no object. Use the company card for the deposits if you need to. What else?’

‘Just a minute.’ I tap away furiously, searching for event suppliers but it’s mainly wedding organisers that are coming up on the search.

‘You’ve got fuck all, haven’t you, Simon? No, that’s not true. You’ve actually got two clowns: fucking Bozo and you. Seriously, how hard can it be?’

‘How about a Bucking Bronco machine?’

‘How about a fucking Bronco-kick up the arse?’

‘I don’t know how you want me to respond to that, Tony.’

His voice goes deadly quiet. ‘I’m very disappointed. I can see I’m gonna have to put some of the interns on this.’

I’m used to Tony’s angry puppet squeal, which is like water off a duck’s back to me. But this low-volume manifestation suggests that I’m in imminent danger of being fired here. I may not exactly like the job, but in the cold light of day I’m not so gung ho about chucking it away, because, frankly, it’s all I have left.

When I uninstalled the Craft from my laptop, I couldn’t quite bring myself to get rid of the Eringordian figurines, which are still arrayed across my desk. The quick-thinking Gorminhex gazes back at me from beneath his cowl and I’m reminded of the ComiCon people firing T-shirts into an ecstatic crowd before the Cosplay contest.

‘How about T-shirt guns?’

There’s a silence before Tony finally acknowledges, ‘That’s not bad, Simon. Pretty fucking good actually. I like it. We can get Cy Beaglehole and a few of the Chinese dignitaries to fire them off from the stage before we bring on ThoughtCrime.’

‘That’s what I was thinking,’ I say, trying to sound enthusiastic.

‘No, you weren’t.’

‘No.’

‘Right, well, order a couple of the guns and five hundred T-shirts, assorted sizes, pale blue, yellow type with the Val-Mall line on the chest: Where value come first, blah, blah. Logo on the back. In the meantime get working on the clowns and the bouncy castles.’ Tony abruptly cuts the connection and I immediately call the Bouncy Castle people.

‘Bounders’ answers a voice, ‘how can I help you?’

 ‘I’d like to hire a bouncy castle,’ I say, at the risk of stating the obvious.

 ‘When for?’

 ‘This Saturday.’

 ‘Saturday? This Saturday coming?’ I get that sharp intake of breath so beloved by mechanics before they deliver the bad news. ‘They’re all out, Saturday. The Pirate Cove and the Funky Fortress are booked out for the Royal Berkshire Show.’

 ‘What about the Tropical Harbour?’

 ‘Some rich kid’s birthday party over in Henley.’

 ‘You’ve got nothing else?’

 ‘We’ve still got the Air Mountain inflatable trampoline.’

 ‘Hang on,’ I say, bringing up the image on their website. The Air Mountain consists of a large, slightly domed, central area surrounded by a dozen inflatable pine trees, which form a kind of soft perimeter. The central area is a bright green colour topped with an irregular whitish splat, presumably representive of a snow-capped Swiss mountain, but in reality just looks like a giant seagull took a shit on a small hillock. It’ll do though. ‘It looks fine. What’s the difference?’

 ‘Not much really. The castles rely on a blower. Constant airflow, see? Air goes in one end and comes out the other. Whereas this is a straightforward inflatable. You pump it up, the kids bounce around. Every so often, it needs a bit of a top up. It’s bigger than the castles but you’d still need an operator.’

 ‘I’ll take it.’

By the time I’m done for the evening I’ve managed to secure Mr Fraggles, the clown Toby mentioned. He sounded drunk and depressed, so I’m not optimistic. But on the upside, I also managed to book Bip and Bop, a promising pair of children’s entertainers, a brace of mimes, a balloon artist and a couple of face-painters as well as the Air Mountain. I’ve put together a bit of type and a logo for an order of five hundred T-shirts to be delivered to the Newbury Val-Mall by eight a.m. this Saturday. I’ve also ordered three T-shirt guns, and a curry from the place on North Street.

Chpt

Somehow I’ve got myself trapped in one of the Think Pods. Through the narrow gap in the white vinyl aperture I can make out the Zuhru pacing back and forth. I can’t see precisely what he’s doing but I’m unable to move or make a sound. If I do, he’ll know I’m here and he’ll try to kill me.

 There’s a harsh buzzing sound. Through the aperture I see that he’s got his hands on a chainsaw. He revs it over and over again.

 I open my eyes, relieved to discover it’s only the insistent buzzing of my front door. I pull on my sweat pants.

I fling open the door expecting Tony, fully prepared to field his bad-tempered carping with a detailed account of my recent achievements. Only it’s not Tony but a tall middle-aged bloke in a mac with thinning sandy hair, mottled complexion and a deeply furrowed nose. In the hall behind him stands a stocky, serious-looking young blonde woman, hands in the pockets of her anorak. As though on cue they both produce warrant cards. ‘Mr Collins?’ queries the man. ‘Mr Simon Collins?’

 ‘Yes.’

 ‘I’m Detective Inspector Humphreys. This is Detective Constable Page. May we come in?’

 ‘Of course,’ I say, ushering them inside. Although I indicate the two living room chairs, they remain standing. Detective Constable Page delves into her coat pocket for a notebook and pen.

 ‘Coffee?’ I offer.

 ‘Had an Expresso on the way,’ demurs Humphreys.

I hate it when people do that. It’s a bloody Espresso for God’s sake.‘So what’s this about?’ I say.

With a brief inclination of his head, Humphreys indicates the half-finished Mr Buffington machine, which squats on my living room carpet. One of the horizontal poles points in my direction like an accusing finger. ‘What you got there then?’

 ‘Personal fitness station. A work in progress. Like me,’ I laugh.

Humphreys sniffs, ‘I’m a Capoeira man myself. Mind if we take a look around?’ Page is already off like some kind of pitbull, heading in the direction of my bedroom.

 ‘I do actually. You haven’t explained what you’re doing here.’

 ‘Oh,’ says Humphreys, producing a document from his inside jacket pocket, which he hands to me. ‘Should’ve said. Doesn’t matter whether you mind or not. This is a warrant to search your premesis.’

 ‘What the hell? Why?’

 ‘Would you mind telling me where you were between …’ Humphreys produces his own notebook, which he makes a show of checking, ‘…nine a.m. and ten a.m. on Thursday morning last week?’

 ‘What am I supposed to have done?’

 ‘Between nine a.m. and ten a.m. Thursday morning if you don’t mind, Mr Collins.’

 ‘I was at a meeting in Covent Garden.’

 ‘Would you mind telling me who this meeting was with, sir?’

 ‘With a man named Ben Owen.’

‘And where did this meeting take place?’

‘At his offices.’

 Humphreys’ face creases up, compressing the furrow, making his nose resemble a weird-looking cock. ‘You’re confirming that then?’

 ‘Why wouldn’t I?’

 ‘I don’t know, why wouldn’t you?’

 I’m blushing furiously and beginning to snatch quick, shallow breaths. Whatever they’re investigating, by now they must be firmly convinced that I’ve done it and more. ‘You’re making me quite anxious. I’m going to need my medication. I’m on pills.’

 ‘Like a pill or two, do you? Perhaps a bit of Ketamine? Special K?’

 ‘It’s Lexotan and they’re prescription.’

 ‘Where are they?’

 ‘In my bathroom.’

 ‘Then no problem, sir.’

 Humphreys follows me into the bathroom, looming large behind me like a early evening shadow. The second I enter I know I’m in trouble: the tiled floor and the porcelain of the bathtub is still stained a darkish red from Heavenly’s hair colouring. ‘Blood in the bathroom,’ bellows Humphreys. Page comes flying in like a pro-football linebacker. My elbow fetches a nasty crack against the sink as the two of them tackle me to the floor.

 ‘It’s only hair dye,’ I object.

 I’m cuffed anyway and dragged back into my living room where I’m roughly shoved onto one of my straight-backed chairs. Once I’m seated, Page disappears back to my bathroom.

 ‘Look, I don’t know what you’re doing in my flat or what you think I’ve done but whatever it is, you’ve got it wrong. I’m a law-abiding citizen.’

 ‘What do you know about Ben Owen?’

 ‘Not much, other than he’s one of the founders of Extermination Revolution.’

 ‘So, what were you doing meeting with him on Thursday morning?’

 ‘My friend and I did some work for him. Nothing illegal.’

 ‘What have you got against Ben Owen, Mr Collins?’

 ‘Nothing.’

 ‘Don’t think it’s blood,’ announces Page, returning. ‘Looks like it might actually be hair dye,’ she concedes, brandishing the used Garnier packet along with an empty mousse container. ‘Hair dye and mousse. I’d say someone’s decided to change their appearance.’

 ‘I had a friend to stay. She dyed her hair. The mousse is mine.’

 ‘Mousse,’ repeats Humphreys. ‘Not gel? Why not wax?’

 ‘Because I prefer mousse. How is that relevant to anything?’

 Humphreys smiles. ‘To a good detective, everything is pertinent: hair product, anti-perspirent, after-shave, cologne, medication. Discount nothing in consideration of the felon. Remember that, Detective Constable.’

 Page nods solemnly as though this is the wisdom of the Oracle.

 ‘You don’t, by any chance, know Eric Lush?’ I say.

 ‘I certainly do. As a matter of fact Detective Inspector Lush was my supervisor at the Police College in Hendon. I learned a hell of a lot from that man.’

 I shake my head in exasperation. ‘Can I have my pills now?’

 ‘When you explain why your friend saw fit to disguise themselves following the suspicious demise of Benjamin Owen.’

 ‘Demise?’

 ‘Why else do you think we’re here, Mr Collins?’

 ‘I have no idea. My life’s been weird for a while. Ben’s dead?’

 ‘On Thursday, at around eleven-thirty a.m. Mr Benjamin Owen was found upside down, tied to a weight and drowned in his own fishtank. There was also a pear stuffed in his mouth. He was full of Ketamine.’

 ‘Oh my God.’

 ‘Who was in your flat, Mr Collins? Who’s been disguising themselves?’

‘Just a friend. Nothing to do with anything.’

‘You’ll have to do better than that, Mr Collins. You do realise that you and…’ Humphreys clicks his fingers at Page, who produces her notebook and reads from it.

‘And Miss Penelope Holmes.’

‘You and Miss Penelope Holmes were the last people to formally meet with Mr Owen before his untimely demise. That meeting was scheduled in Mr Owen’s diary. A little cross-checking in his files gave us your details, addresses and so on. He also had your passport details on file. Now why would that be, Mr Collins?’

‘We went on a fact-finding trip to China for him. We’d just got back the day before we met with him.’

‘I see. Make a note to check that with Border Force.’

‘Check,’ replies Page, scribbling in her pad.

‘Can I have my pills, please?’

‘For God’s sake, get him his pills,’ Humphreys orders.

The obedient Page trots back off to the bathroom while Humphreys sits himself astride one of my chairs and positions it to face me. ‘There are three possibilities here, Mr Collins. Accidental death, suicide or homicide. To be fair, this might well be an auto-asphyxiation scenario gone wrong. But to the best of my knowledge, the incorporation of a fish tank into an undertaking of this kind is very uncommon, not to say unique.’

Page returns with my Lexotan and places the little container on the table in front of me. I lean forward and waggle my arms behind my back, reminding her that they are still cuffed. ‘Can you…ah…’

Page shakes her head emphatically. ‘Afraid not, Mr Collins. We’re not permitted to supply medication to anyone in our custody. We could get the arse sued off us.’

‘You’re depriving me of my anxiety medication. That’s unlawful.’

Humphreys considers this. ‘How many do you need?’

‘One. For the moment.’

‘If Detective Constable Page were to place one pill on the table in front of you and you were to reach it and somehow ingest it, then that would be down to you.’ He nods at Page who picks up the container and struggles briefly with the child-proof cap before she places a single Lexotan near the edge of the table, within pecking distance.

I lean forward, craning my neck to reach the pill, turning my head sideways to obtain some leverage and I’m going cross-eyed trying to keep track of it. I chase it across the surface with my tongue but it’s slippery and I lose sight of it. I feel it slip off the edge of the table; it lands somewhere in the pile of the carpet underneath. I slump back in my chair. ‘It fell on the floor,’ I point out.

Humphreys and Page stare at me blankly.

‘Sorry, but our hands are tied.’

‘Are you fucking serious?’

Humphreys shrugs. ‘Figure of speech.’

It’s become a matter of some urgency now; I can feel my heart beginning to palpitate, beads of sweat are already trickling down my back so I sink to my knees and rootle around underneath the table. It’s like bobbing for apples only I’m bobbing for a tiny white Lexotan amidst a beige carpet. I inhale a good deal of dust and a few fluff balls before I finally manage to locate the elusive pill and tongue it into my mouth. If I’m not about to spend the next fifty years in Wormwood Scrubs, I really should get a vacuum under here

Page assists me to my feet and dumps me back in the chair.

‘Better?’ asks Humphreys.

‘No,’ I gag. The problem now is that my throat’s gone tacky and I can’t get the pill down. It’s stuck in the back of my throat along with the carpet bits. I’m dry wretching and reasonably certain that I’m about to pass out.

‘Get him something to drink,’ orders Humphreys.

Page grabs my coffee mug from the other side of the table. It’s from last night and what’s left is stone cold but she holds it to my lips and I manage to swallow enough to shift the pill, which slides down my gullet along with the carpet residue.

Page now turns her attention to my briefcase, which is still on the table. She sniffs at it suspiciously as she unclips the hasps.

‘Don’t do that…’ I croak.

Too late. Page has already lifted the lid. She recoils from the residue inside as the pungent odour of stale vomit pervades the room. ‘Oh my God,’ she gags, slamming shut the lid and reeling back from the table.

‘We had a bit of a party a few nights ago,’ I explain.

‘You’re a hard man to interview,’ observes Humphreys with no trace of irony.

 ‘Well, you shouldn’t have cuffed me. Is that even legal? Am I under arrest?’

‘You’re currently being detained for questioning, Mr Collins.’ Humphreys glances at Page who is clearly a hardy soul and has quickly managed to collect herself. ‘Detective Constable?’

Page duly rattles off a section of rote-learned justification: ‘Reasonable force may be applied under the terms of the Criminal Law Act 1967, Section 117. In establishing an objective basis for believing that a person may escape or attempt to escape, an officer may react but need not wait for a physical act.’

‘Excellent. To whit, we have a lawfully detained suspect. What we need to do now, Detective Constable, is consider motive. Experience has taught me that motive is invariably down to sex or money, or lack thereof. What is it here, I wonder, Mr Collins? What’s the deal? Could Mr Collins be a sexual deviant who enjoys engaging in auto-asphyxiation play with Mr Owen. Naughty, naughty. An auto-asphyxiation game that went, on this occasion, terribly, tragically amiss?’

‘Are you out of your mind?’ I splutter.

‘There’s an apple and two oranges in the fruit bowl. Both on the turn,’ observes Page.

‘There you are, Mr Collins, consider everything. Even the contents of your fruit bowl may be relevant. Do you see? For example if you had one or more pears in your possession that would certainly be pertinent to our investigation.’

‘A pair of pears,’ adds Page.

‘Indeed,’ acknowledges Humphreys, indicating my half-finished machine. ‘You claim the device over there is exercise equipment, Mr Collins. What form of exercise would that be? Doesn’t look like any sort of fitness machine I’m familiar with.’

To be fair, the contrivance does present a rather unsettling appearance right now. There’s a padded bench connected to a couple of upright struts, on either side are twin armatures with straps attached. Above it all is a single pulley with a looped wire attached like some sort of garroting chair. Heavenly and I were quite pissed when we worked on it and clearly, we’ve gone badly wrong somewhere in the assembly. It doesn’t help that the contraption is a sinister, glossy black.

‘So what’s it really for?’ Humphreys leans eagerly towards me like a lurcher on the scent. ‘What kind of apparatus is it, Mr Collins?’

 ‘A Mr Buffington.’

‘Mr Buffington. Write that down,’ he instructs Page. ‘First name?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Is he involved, your Mr Buffington?’

‘It’s a brand name.’

‘True,’ confirms Page. ‘Mr Buffington is a well-known range of fitness machines.’

Humphreys glances at his subordinate irritably. ‘So, there is no Mr Buffington?’

‘Not so far as I know although there is a picture of a bodybuilder on the logo. That might be Mr Buffington.’

‘I don’t think you’ve set it up right,’ observes Page.

‘I know,’ I say, ‘the instructions are impossible to follow.’

‘Well I don’t like what you’ve done with it,’ snaps Humphreys, ‘it looks like a Hannibal Lector pervert-appliance.’

‘Not my fault,’ I say. The Lexotan is kicking in now and I’m feeling relaxed enough to stand my ground.

 ‘All right, discounting the accidental auto-asphyxiation route for the moment, let’s examine the more likely motive, shall we?’

‘Money,’ annouces Page, ‘filthy Lucas.’

‘Lucre,’ I say.

‘Lucas,’ corrects Humphreys. I can’t be bothered to argue with him, it could go on all day. ‘You’re aware that Ben Owen was a wealthy man, I take it? Surprisingly wealthy for an activist.’

‘I am. There was a big hoo hah about his multi-million dollar property in Malibu.’

‘There’s a lot more to it than that, Mr Collins. There are no fewer than three accounts in the Cayman Islands controlled by the late Mr Owen. Those are the ones we know about. A significant amount of cash was also found in the underfloor safe in his office. Plenty of motive there I should say.’

‘I don’t disagree. I didn’t like Ben Owen much but I’m not a pervert or a psychopath and you’ve got no evidence to suggest otherwise.’

‘Yet,’ replies Humphreys, rootling in his ear. ‘From the records you don’t appear to be a member of Extermination Revolution and you don’t work there. So, if you didn’t like Mr Owen what were you doing travelling all the way to China for him?’

‘It’s complicated, I was doing it for a friend.’

‘This Penelope…?’

‘Holmes,’ adds Page. ‘Penelope Holmes. Don’t worry, we’ll be interviewing her shortly.’

‘I’ll save you the trouble. Unlike me, she is a member of Extermination Revolution. I went with her on a fact-finding mission.’

‘And what facts did you find on this mission?’

I take a breath. It’s obvious that Humphreys is the kind of copper who likes to shape the evidence to fit his own suppositions rather than the other way round. He’s an implacable plodder and I’m the one in his sights right now. If I don’t I don’t reset his defaults, and quickly, I might well be spending the rest of my days as some tattooed monster’s bitch. ‘Can I just ask you to hear me out for a minute, Detective Inspector? This might sound a bit odd.’

‘It’s why we’re here, Mr Collins. To hear you out.’

‘I think Ben Owen might have been using his organization to blackmail the Chinese government.’

 Humphreys furrows his brow, gazing at me intently. If he’s trying to convey the impression of a deductive genius in the process of momentous cogitation, he’s wasting his time, given that his weird nose has just transformed itself into a cock again. ‘What you’ve just told me is not…inconsistent with some of the information we’ve been turning up on Ben Owen.’

‘In what way?’

‘I can’t go into detail and it’s early days but some of the funds, which have been transferred into those Cayman accounts, appear to have originated from Chinese controlled corporations. I’d like you to tell us everything you think you know.’

 ‘How long have those accounts been active?’

‘I can’t tell you that, but a while now.’

‘I think the whole Extermination Revolution thing was a scam from the start, a catspaw, a convenient tool for China to undermine the West and our economies.’

‘What makes you say that?’

‘A very senior Chinese official more or less let it slip, while we were over there.’

‘Well?’

‘And I think Ben got greedy. He turned on his paymasters, started ratcheting up the screws with this boycott.’

‘And?’

‘He was most likely murdered by the Zuhru.’

‘The Zulu?’ Humphreys expression cracks before he emits a gale of laughter. I catch a gust of sour breath tinged with stale coffee. ‘You know what? You had me going there. That was good, wasn’t it, Detective Constable?’

‘Very good, boss. Almost convincing.’

‘But then you overshot, Mr Collins. We’ve got CCTV footage from the camera located on Brook Street, you think we wouldn’t have picked up on a seven-foot Zulu warrior in the vicinity? What we do have is you and Miss…’

‘Holmes,’ adds Page.

‘You and Miss Holmes on camera, turning into the street at nine fifty-seven a.m. There’s no Zulu, just you and Miss Holmes.’

‘Zuhru.’

‘Zulu, Zuhru, what’s the difference?’

‘About three foot. The Zuhru is an assassin. Actually one of a long line of torturers and assassins. A midget or a dwarf, I’m not sure. In China they call them the Midgets of Murder. I saw him in Guangzhou, then I saw him again at Ben’s offices, I’m certain of it.’

Humphreys blasts me with another facefull of rancid air. ‘Midgets of Murder? Oh, I like that.’ He adopts a ridiculously pompous, high-pitched voice which doesn’t sound remotely like me: ‘“It wasn’t me, honest. It was the Midgets of Murder.” This is one for the Rec Room, Detective Constable.’

‘Too right, boss,’ chuckles Page.

‘So how is it you were the only one to have seen this homicidal shortarse? None of the witnesses in the office mentioned anything of the sort.’

‘I don’t know. There weren’t many people about and because he’s short, I suppose. Too short to have been seen going up or down the stairs to Ben’s office. There’s a solid balustrade.’

Humphreys shakes his head. ‘I’d like you to take a look at this, please.’ He glances at Page who produces her smartphone.

Page manipulates the icons on her screen and brings up the CCTV video. Holding the phone to my face, she presses play. The time stamp reads nine fifty-six a.m. Grainy footage reveals a few passing pedestrians until some forty seconds later Heavenly and I hurry along, keeping an eye out for a cab. ‘There you are. The two of you on camera, picked up by our facial recognition software,’ explains Page, pausing the video on a profile of our faces, ‘a lovely shot of you and Miss Holmes, having just emerged from Lancashire Court onto Brook Street.’

‘Now, one question, Mr Collins. Why were you both in such a hurry to leave the vicinity?’

‘I’d just seen the bloody Zuhru at Extermination Revolution and I know he recognized me. I wasn’t interested in hanging about.’

‘I’m sure you weren’t, Mr Collins, especially if you’d just filled Ben Owen with Ketamine and dunked him in his own fishtank.’ Humphreys eyeballs me expectantly. ‘Anything to say to that, Mr Collins?’

‘I’ve already said it. You should be looking for the Zhuru.’

Humphreys grunts in frustration before getting to his feet. ‘Uncuff him,’ he orders Page.

She complies and I gratefully stretch out my arms. ‘What does this mean? I’m not under arrest any more?’ I massage my elbow, which is quite swollen.

‘You’re not under arrest, Mr Collins, but I have to inform you that I am not satisfied with your explanation as to your whereabouts and activities on Thursday morning. At this time we can only prove you were there, we do not yet have sufficient evidence to charge you with any offence. However, you are still a suspect in a serious crime, so I would ask that you not attempt to travel until this matter is resolved.’

 If I wasn’t already seated I’m certain that my legs would have given way. Despite the Lexotan I’m red-faced and sweating again. ‘What about the rest of the footage?’ I ask.

‘What about it?’

‘Have you looked through it all?’

‘It’s all been reviewed by the facial recognition software.’

‘Which was only searching for our faces. But have you actually sat down and looked through it?’

‘Why would we?’

‘On the off chance you might be interested in catching a real murderer.’

‘Have a care, Mr Collins,’ warns Humphreys wagging a meaty finger in my face.

 ‘I can run it on fast forward,’ offers Page, thumbing the screen of her smartphone. ‘There’s footage from all the CCTV cameras on Brook Street, New Bond Street and the camera on Avery Row from nine a.m. all the way up ‘til eleven-thirty a.m. when the body was discovered.’

 Humphreys sighs, ‘If you insist, Mr Collins.’

Page lets the footage run at triple speed. ‘Shoppers…shoppers…office workers…tourists…shoppers…what am I supposed to be looking for? A Zulu or a midg…oh, hang on. Here’s something.’ Page rewinds and checks the segment again before offering the phone to Humphreys.

I get to my feet, positioning close enough to peer over his shoulder as Humphreys rewinds. The footage is from the same location but a little later. At ten twenty-eight a.m. according to the time stamp, a short, stocky figure with a briefcase emerges from Lancashire Court and begins to stroll along Brook Street at a leisurely pace. The little sod has his back to the camera so I can’t say for certain that it’s the Zuhru but it’s obvious that he’s a good couple of feet shorter than the pedestrians around him. ‘Nah,’ pronounces Humphreys, ‘that’s just some porky schoolboy.’ A few yards further and the figure halts, preparing to cross the road. He checks for oncoming traffic, as he turns his head towards the camera, I see the unmistakably lined and twisted features of the Zuhru.

‘That’s no schoolboy, boss.’

Humphreys pauses the footage and stares at me. ‘This is the man you saw at Extermination Revolution?’

‘It is. That’s the Zuhru.’

‘You’d swear to that?’

‘I’d know him anywhere. I have nightmares about him.’

‘You think he recognized you?’

‘Definitely.’

Humphreys nods his head slowly, I can almost hear the ponderous gears of his brain clunking into place. ‘That was either the world’s luckiest punt or you may actually be telling the truth here. It seems an apology is due, Mr Collins. You’ve just shifted roles from prime suspect to chief witness.’

‘That’s a relief.’

‘You’re not out of the woods yet. The most likely scenario is that your little mate, who, by the way, is a dwarf, will be long gone by now, back to China; we’ll have the Border Force run a NeoFace check. But there is a chance he’s still here. If he is, it’s just possible that he might decide to come after you and possibly Miss Holmes.’

‘Why? We’re not involved with any of this.’

‘You say you saw this man in China? In a government office?’

‘I did.’

‘Simon…can I call you Simon?’

‘By all means.’

‘Simon, if everything you’ve told us is true then you’re a witness connecting the Chinese state with an assassin operating on UK soil. They’re not going to be too happy about that.’

‘Shit, I hadn’t thought of that.’

‘I’ll need to know your movements over the next few days.’

‘I have to be in Newbury this Saturday; for the ThoughtCrime thing.’

‘Lucky you,’ observes Page.

‘I’m Jim Reeves man myself. Can’t be doing with those noisy buggers. Do you have to be there?’

 ‘My job’s riding on it.’

‘Fine. There’ll be a police presence. In the meantime, I’ll assign a uniform to this place, just to be on the safe side. If you see anything out of the ordinary, or you remember anything that you think might help, you ring me.’ Humphreys hands me his card. ‘In any event, we’ll be giving Miss Holmes a call shortly.’

We shake hands, all friends now; I breath a sigh of relief as the two of them head for the door. At the last moment Humphreys turns and my stomach does a flip-flop. He indicates the Mr Buffington apparatus with an expression of considerable distaste, ‘That is just so wrong,’ he says.

Chpt

‘Nice to see you back, Mr Collins.’ Says Mrs Lush.

 ‘I’m going to organize protection for you. I think you and your friend may be in a bit of danger.

‘Cos you’re a drunken old cunt,’ says Charlie Stink.

‘I am, you’re right, my old chum. I’m a terrible old drunk,’ growls Mr Fraggles. ‘But that’s not gonna stop me from killing you.’

‘

Health & Dafety

T shirt gun in the sports department. Out of t shirts starts firing balled uop socks around a cricket ball.

Shaping the global narrative in ways that strengthen and legitimise China’s pre-eminent place in the world is vital to victory.

The party refers to it as ‘discourse control’ and it’s been pouring enormous resources into influencing Western media, public opinion and academia

But yes, I want her to stay. Fear does not stop death. It stops life. Be bold, Simon, and

I want her to stay

‘You’re a collaborator. You should be tarred and feathered.’

‘Then here is something to think on: how will your precious workers be paid when our factories have no customers because of your western boycott?’

There are many problems being created at this time. Since there are many of the factories in my prefecture, I have been ordered to find a permanent solution.

Charlie Stink – Mrs Fraggles’ ventriloquist dummy

Chasing your dreams

My dream is perofrming onstage sometimes at a concert, sometimes it’s a play, and suddenly realizing I’m not wearing any pants. It’s a recurring thing.

 ‘Wait, what? What’s Valentine got to do with this?’

 ‘He’ll be turning off the security system for us.’

 ‘How? Who?’

 ‘You sound like an drunken owl. Valentine, your hacker friend. He took a look at my website for me. We’ve been emailing a bit and I’ve been talking to him about the work we’ve been doing. He’s a very sweet boy really.’

 ‘Speaking of which what was with the lever quote?’

 ‘Oh, I pinched that from The Craft. Gorminhex. I thought it might get you enthused.’

 ‘